

Next to NetGo

By: Luce Red

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Chapter 1

Title: Next to NetGo

Series: Hikaru no Go

Disclaimer: Characters are the creation of Hotta and Obata

Pairing: Akira/Hikaru

Type: AU. What if Hikaru had continued playing NetGo, and never became an insei (or a pro)?

Notes: Sequel to Upon NetGo

Summary: Hikaru is dragged to the world of professional Go, but you can't make him drink.

"Stop pacing--you're going to wear out the tatami," Akira said.

Hikaru jolted to a stop, staring at him while he chewed on his lower lip worriedly. "Huh?"

"It's just a friendly game," Akira said, pulling Hikaru down to sit next to him. "I don't understand. You've played hundreds, thousands of games on the internet, and you've played dozens of games at amateur tournaments. Why are you acting like a headless chicken over tomorrow?"

"Headless chicken?!" Hikaru turned to him, huffing in outrage.

Akira decided not to point out to Hikaru that shaking his head continuously for the last half hour had made his hair stick in all directions, giving him the appearance of a... demented chicken. Instead, he reached out and smoothed some of the blond hair into place.

Hikaru endured it for a few seconds, then shook his head and stood up, starting to pace again, his arms crossed this time. He looked like a miniature whirlwind in the room.

Akira rolled his eyes heavenward.

"This is serious, Akira!" Hikaru said. "This is the first time I'm playing against your friends! Hell, this is the first time I'm *meeting* your friends. Who are all professional Go players." His pacing brought him to the end of the room, and he turned around slowly. "When they hear that I'm just an amateur, they're going to eat me alive," he proclaimed.

"No, they won't," Akira said. He didn't have that many friends of his age in the professional Go world, but those that he knew were all... normal.

"Hah!" Hikaru pointed a finger at him. "That's what you said when you introduced Ogata-san to me. And he spent the entire game mentally taking my clothes off."

Akira sighed. It had been a bad tactic, introducing Ogata-san to Hikaru. "I can guarantee you that my friends are not going to do that."

"But!" Hikaru began to pace again. "What if they are? I can't stop thinking about it. Something's going to happen. I can feel it." He started to chew on his lip again.

"Hikaru."

"I mean, I don't know why. It's just Akira's friends... I'm going to wear my best clothes, and I'm no slouch at Go, but, but..."

"Shindou Hikaru."

The sound of his full name brought Hikaru up short. "Huh?"

"Sit down." Akira patted the seat next to him.

After a moment of hesitation, Hikaru went and sat down. He blinked in surprise when Akira pulled him close. "Okay, let's try this. I want you to think as hard as you can about all the things that can go wrong," he said, then as Hikaru's eyes widened, he added, "for fifteen minutes. After that, you've got to promise me to stop being... so jittery."

"How-how are you going to do that?"

"I have my ways. All right? Start."

Hikaru shut his eyes firmly. After a few seconds, his arms wrapped around Akira. Soft mumblings came from his lips, as he squeezed his eyes tighter and tighter.

Akira watched the clock. "Time's up," he said softly. "Stop thinking."

Hikaru's body went limp against him, and his eyes opened slowly.

"Let's go to sleep," Akira said, and kissed him.

Akira resisted the urge to tap his feet, and was tempted to berate himself for not thinking that this might happen. On the other hand, how was he to predict the movements of one Shindou Hikaru, excitable high school student by day, infamous NetGo player by night?

He raised a hand and banged it loudly on the door, before shouting, "Come out of the bathroom, Hikaru!"

The refusal was instant, petulant and negative. "No!"

"You can't hide in my bathroom forever," Akira tried for a reasonable tone.

"Yes I can! At least until your friends go home!"

Akira paused. Clearly, it was futile to continue this line of argument any further, since it would only lead to an increasingly childish exchange of "No!", "Yes!", and "Eat my shorts!" Strategy was essential. He retreated silently.

Ashiwara stopped him in the living room to ask, "This is the first time Hikaru is coming to one of your discussion groups, isn't it?" and Akira had to concentrate on not blushing as he asserted that this was nothing but an ordinary discussion group, nothing to make a fuss over, really. Ashiwara still looked too amused for Akira's peace of mind as he went off, saying something about NetGo.

When Akira got back to the closed (and locked) bathroom door, he could hear Hikaru calling out plaintively, "Akira?" at five-second intervals.

Standing outside, Akira squared his shoulders. "Are you ready to come out now?" he asked pointedly.

There was a pause. "You're here!" Hikaru said in a tone of discovery, then whined, "Where did you go?"

"Oh," Akira said, keeping his voice casual. "I went to get the keys."

Heavy silence ensued.

Akira continued, "My mother keeps a spare set of keys for all the locks in the house, you see, and she's always careful to put them in safe place." He waited, but there was no response. "It would be much better if you unlocked the door yourself, Hikaru," he said. "It would be discourteous of me to force my way in."

A longer pause ensued, before Hikaru said, "But your friends..."

"My friends are all nice people," Akira lied. Well, he reasoned, they *could* be nice. "I mean, you've met Ashiwara-san, right?" he said quickly.

"Yeah, but..."

Hikaru's voice trailed off into a mumble, though Akira thought he caught something about "Mr. Puppytails" and "... name doesn't suit his Go..."

"Hikaru?" Akira said when there had been silence for a while. "It'll be all right, I promise." Part of him wondered why it was that someone as friendly as Hikaru seemed to be so apprehensive about meeting other Go players.

"Really?"

It was so soft that Akira didn't realize Hikaru had replied at first. "It'll be fine," he said, lowering his voice as well. "After all, I'll be here. If they get too much, I'll throw them out."

"Okay." There was the sound of a huge sigh. "And you've got keys anyway..." There was a click, and the bathroom door opened to reveal a scowling Hikaru.

"Thank you," Akira said solemnly, moving to one side so Hikaru could step out.

Hikaru started to move, then stopped. "Wait," he said.

Akira froze, noting that Hikaru's other hand was still on the door, ready to slam it close anytime.

Hikaru looked up and down him. "I don't see any keys on you," he said.

"Well," Akira said, his heart in his mouth, "take a look at the door you just unlocked."

Hikaru turned his head to do so. Surreptitiously, Akira took a step closer, just in case...

After a split second, Hikaru's eyes widened. "Wait, it's a deadbolt! You don't need any key for that! You tricked..."

Akira snagged Hikaru's arm and pulled him close for a kiss.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 2

"Why do I have to be here again?" Hikaru asked.

"Because I'm afraid you'll hide in the toilet again?" Akira said, removing his hand from Hikaru's waist in order to lean forward to unlatch the front gate.

"But..." Hikaru's protests died away at the sight of the strangers outside.

"Isumi-san," Akira said, managing to hide his dismay when he saw the person with him. "And Waya-san. Please come in." He bowed a little in welcome and gestured inside the gate.

"Please excuse the intrusion," Isumi said politely, giving a bow, "and thank you for the invitation."

"You're welcome," Akira said, and managed to grab Hikaru's arm just in time. "And this is Shindou Hikaru. He's a friend of mine who's joining us as well." He was tempted to say 'boyfriend' just to see how Isumi would react, but the presence of Waya stopped him. Waya had never showed the slightest friendliness to him and if there was no one else around, he could even be openly hostile, as Akira knew from experience. Akira didn't know the reason for his antipathy, but he did not want to give Waya any ammunition. "These are Isumi Shinichiro and Waya Yoshitake."

"Hello," Hikaru said, almost sulkily.

"Nice to meet you, Shindou-san," Isumi said.

Waya echoed him, and asked, "You are not a pro, are you?"

Hikaru looked from him to Akira uncertainly, as though not understanding why the question was significant. "N-no. I'm in high

school."

"Oh," Waya said, and did not elaborate. Instead, he looked as though he had thought of something funny.

His expression told Akira that Waya thought it was funny that he would be playing with an amateur. He shook the thought away, and gestured towards the front door.

Inside, Isumi said to him, "I hope you won't mind that I asked Waya along as well; he was interested in playing with some of your father's students."

"Not at all," Akira lied smoothly, leading the way to the front door. "Waya-san, please make yourself at home."

In the process of removing his shoes, Waya gave an equally impersonal nod, and almost carelessly, murmured, "Please excuse the intrusion." He straightened and looked around as they entered. "Nice place you have here, Touya-san. So big and peaceful. Then again, you still live with your parents, don't you?"

There was a silence as Akira tried to think of a response to a tone that he could only describe as patronizing. Waya, he knew, had moved out to live on his own a couple of years ago.

Hikaru was starting to recover from his nervousness at meeting more Go pros, and frowned as he took in Waya's words.

"Waya," Isumi said.

"I didn't mean anything by it!" Waya protested, looking from him to Akira. "Touya-san knows that I was just making a remark, right?"

Put like that, courtesy demanded that Akira only nod, dismissing the slight. "It's all right. Please, this way," he led them towards the rooms that were usually set aside for study and teaching. A couple of his students were already inside, setting up the Go boards, and

chattering excitedly about recent games. He had introduced Hikaru to his students just now, and all parties had been icily polite, but then Ashiwara had come in, and helped to break up the ice with his easy-going manner. He slid the door open and gestured Waya and Isumi inside.

He saw with pleasure that Ashiwara was still there, a Go board before him, obviously replaying a game from kifu. The three insei, Kaneda, Fujimoto, and Ohda were exchanging comments on the game, with Ohda shushing them angrily when the other two got too loud. She looked up at Akira's entrance.

"Sensei, stop these *boys* from talking so loudly," she said. "But who are your friends?"

Akira hid a smile. Ohda Midori, rising insei, was more than capable of squashing her fellow students on her own, but she was using the excuse to alert everyone to the newcomers. He cleared his throat lightly. "Everyone, this is Isumi Shinichiro and Waya Yoshitake, both 3-dan. We're also expecting Ochi, but he'll be a little late."

Akira noticed that Ohda rolled her eyes surreptitiously at the latter part of his announcement; she disliked Ochi, calling him 'creepy'.

Ashiwara introduced himself as well, though Akira knew that both Isumi and Waya already knew him, if not directly. He added, "This is the first time Shindou-kun is joining the study sessions. I hope you'll all welcome him."

There were polite nods, when Fujimoto suddenly snapped his fingers. "I knew I'd heard your name before, when Sensei introduced you just now," he exclaimed to Shindou. "Winner of the Children's Meijin, Children's Kisei and Children's Honinbou titles three years ago, right?"

At the pronouncement, Hikaru blushed bright red. "Y-yeah."

"Really?" Kaneda looked at Hikaru with more interest, a change from his initial indifference. "I heard that you won all three titles for two years running. You stopped taking part after that. What's the matter, you were not interested in Go anymore?" His question was blunt but the tone was merely curious; Kaneda was Go-mad and therefore not particularly diplomatic.

The silence as they waited for Hikaru to demur was significant; Akira noticed both Isumi and Waya exchanging glances, and Waya seemed to be annoyed.

"Well... I..." Hikaru ran a hand through his hair, his forehead wrinkling as he frowned. "I was preparing for the entrance exams for senior high, and I was too busy..."

But Akira knew it was because Sai had left, and he felt a pang at the tentative tone.

"Then why aren't you an insei, Shindou-kun?" Ashiwara asked. "Those are impressive achievements. You could be a pro."

As Akira expected, the question only served to give Hikaru a start. "Huh? Me, a pro?" He held his hands up to chest level and started to wave them, almost frantically, in negation. "No, no way, I just play in amateur tournaments with the school and, and, on the internet," he said, his words seeming to tumble over one another. "No way," he added.

The silence this time was a little longer. Before anyone had the chance to feel thoroughly uncomfortable, Ashiwara said, with his usual friendliness, "I was just studying the kifu of Touya-sensei's newest games in China. Would you all like to have a look as well?"

Isumi took up the offer. "I'd love to do that," he said, getting up and sitting down next to Ashiwara. "Who was he playing?" Waya frowned harder, and joined him.

That was the cue for the remaining insei to turn back to the game. "It was with Li Xing 8-dan," Ohda said.

"I heard about that," Isumi said. "Narrow victory of two and a half moku, wasn't it?"

"Narrow but decisive," Ohda said firmly, pointing to the Go board. "Look, Touya-sensei played a taisha here..."

Akira waited a few moments, then sat down, pulling Hikaru down beside him. Hikaru turned his head slightly and flashed a quick smile of reassurance, before turning his attention back to the game, though he glanced now and then at the pros and the insei crowding around, his unease showing. Not for the first time, Akira wondered exactly what it was about pros that unnerved Hikaru so much. It couldn't be just plain nervousness.

After they had discussed it for a while, Ashiwara excused himself, saying that he had to go back home early. Hikaru didn't even seem to notice his departure, but Akira gave him a grateful look; Ashiwara had clearly stayed to help make sure Hikaru's introduction to the others went smoothly.

"... do you think Black was trying to answer the hamete with this hand?" Ohda was asking.

"Too obvious," Kaneda decided. "It won't trick Touya-sensei."

"Isn't that why White played all the way over here?" Ohda asked.

"But then it doesn't make sense," Kaneda said.

"Not if White goes under..." Isumi said, pointing to the pertinent section, the action answering their confusion far better than mere words.

Akira took a moment to contemplate Isumi, who was rising slowly but surely in the pro world. Though only 3-dan, Isumi was one of those

tipped to take a title one day. Akira secretly considered him a rival for the Honinbou title. Some people had called Isumi's style boring, but Hikaru had said that he played very deep games, and said he was someone to be wary of. How Hikaru knew this when he had seen only two kifu of Isumi's games--one of Isumi's Beginning Dan game with Kuwabara Honinbou, and one with Akira--Akira did not know.

Speaking of Hikaru... he glanced at Hikaru, who was taking in the reconstruction of the game with intent eyes, his nervousness disappearing in the face of his focus. He resisted a Hikaru-like impulse to roll his eyes. At least Hikaru could still be distracted by Go.

Fujimoto was thinking out loud. "So, if White goes under, and ties up the right..."

Waya spoke, "Yeah, you're right, Isumi! Good thinking." He glanced up with a triumphant look at the other insei, and stared, surprised, at Hikaru's serious expression. "Would you like us to explain what we're discussing, Shindou-san?" he asked. "This is pro-level stuff, after all."

Akira winced, and even Kaneda looked up, before quickly lowering his head.

Hikaru blinked at being addressed directly, and seemed to come out of a private reverie. "N-no," he said, a hint of his nervousness returning. "I'm fine. Thanks."

His polite refusal gave Waya pause, though he said nothing as they continued to discuss the game to its end. When it ended, Ohda leant back. "Touya Kouyo-sensei is *such* a genius," she said with deep feeling. "I think he's unbeatable."

Kaneda blinked from behind his glasses. "I don't know if that's true. He lost to Sai last month."

Akira felt Hikaru twitch at the name.

"Oh, Sai!" Ohda waved a hand lazily. "Sai only plays NetGo. That doesn't count. You know what? I think Sai's really a supercomputer that some scientists built somewhere."

"They say there isn't a computer powerful enough to play Go yet," Kaneda said. "Sai's a real person."

That was the cue, evidently, for her fellow students to get into a discussion of Sai's real identity.

"He always disappears around Golden Week... do you think he's a salaryman? They usually get a break around that time," Fujimoto said.

"He always logs on at night, too."

"When he first started, he logged on in the daytime."

"I heard that some people tried to trace him through his ISP."

"What's an ISP?"

"Don't you mean IP address?"

"But some people say since Sai wants his privacy, we should let him be..."

Entertaining as it sounded, Akira saw with concern that Hikaru was looking more and more nervous as the insei exchanged rumours and speculations, as though he expected to be unveiled any minute. *Is this why he didn't want to meet the others?* Akira wondered as he interrupted gently. "That's enough," he said to his students. "You can discuss that in your own time. Do you want to play against one another now?"

"What's the matter?" Waya said as his insei flashed chagrined looks at one another. "Why don't you want other people to talk about Sai?"

"You know about Sai too, Waya-san?" Ohda asked, before she caught Akira's eyes, and subsided.

Waya nodded. "I've played with him ever since he started appearing online," he said. "At that time, I thought that he played like a modern Shuusaku."

Hikaru looked up at that, interest in his eyes.

"But then I realized that he was just a kid," Waya said.

Hikaru turned pale.

"What do you mean?" Isumi asked.

"You mean you were able to contact him?" Kaneda asked, his eyes widening.

Waya glanced at him and at the rapt faces, and almost smirked at Akira's concerned face. "There was once, after he defeated me," he said. "He sent me a short message, saying, 'I'm strong, aren't I?' just like an elementary school kid."

"Wow. No one has ever received a message like that from Sai," Fujimoto said.

"Yeah." Kaneda looked awed.

Hikaru's face was looking very strange.

"Hikaru?" Akira whispered. "Are you all right?"

Waya turned to them at his whisper. "What's the matter with him?" he asked Akira, before ignoring him in favour of talking to Hikaru directly. "Shindou-san, you've also heard of Sai before, right? He's this famous NetGo player..."

"You!" Hikaru burst out. "You're *Zelda* !"

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 3

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Hikaru immediately clapped a hand to his mouth.

Waya's jaw fell at his outburst. "How did you know that I'm Zelda?" he asked, leaning forward, his eyes intent as he stared at Hikaru. "And how did you know about my exchange with Sai?"

"I-I..." Hikaru's expression was horror-struck, and his gaze flickered to Akira once, and desperately around the room, as though looking for an escape.

"I've only ever told this story to Isumi," Waya went on, "and even he doesn't know that I'm Zelda. How did you know?"

"I-It was an accident!" Hikaru burst out. "I didn't mean to!"

Waya's expression intensified into one of anger. "What do you mean, you didn't mean to?" he demanded, sounding as though he was grinding the words out.

Akira opened his mouth to speak--to say anything--but he found himself tongue-tied. He had never heard of this before. Hikaru had been very insistent that he did not communicate with any of his NetGo opponents, other than to arrange games.

"Well?" Waya asked. Even though he remained seated, he seemed to be preparing to launch himself at Hikaru, like a tiger preparing to pounce on its prey.

Hikaru swallowed audibly, unable to look away.

The entire room was hushed, as though waiting for the kill.

"Stop," Akira found himself saying. "Stop questioning Hikaru. He doesn't have to answer your questions."

"What? You..." Waya leapt for Akira, only to be held back by Isumi. The other insei exclaimed and tried to move out of the way.

"Waya, stop!" Isumi said, holding his friend back.

Looking shocked, Hikaru scrambled back, pulling Akira behind him as he did so. "Don't you dare attack Akira!" he shouted.

"Not unless you explain everything!" Waya was still struggling with Isumi. "What's going on, Shindou!" he shouted. If anything, his face grew even redder. His eyes narrowed suddenly. "Don't tell me you're Sai..."

Hikaru turned so pale that he looked nearly colourless. "M-me? You're joking."

Akira winced inwardly, while Kaneda, Fujimoto and Ohda started to mutter amongst themselves. Perhaps it was too much to expect the secret to remain one forever?

"I'm not," Waya said. "I thought a long time ago that Sai was just a kid. A few people thought it was Touya. But it can't be Touya because I saw him arranging to play a game with Sai myself." He turned to glare at Akira. "I remember, you missed the first day of the pro exams to play with Sai."

Hikaru turned to look at Akira, momentarily distracted by that tidbit.

Waya went on, his eyes still on Hikaru, "So even if you aren't Sai, you must know who he is."

"I-I don't know!" Hikaru insisted. He swallowed. "It w-was a coincidence," he began, his words hesitant, "I was at the internet café and I saw this screen showing a NetGo game, so I watched the

game. The man playing won against someone called Zelda, but he left suddenly... someone called him, I think. He didn't log out. So..."

"You pretended to be Sai?" Ohda asked.

Hikaru glanced at Akira for a second. "Yeah," he said, before turning to Waya. "I shouldn't have done that, I know. It was very rude of me."

"But that means... you've seen Sai!" Ohda said. "What does he look like?"

"Uh..." Hikaru avoided her eyes. "I don't remember, and besides, I ran away after I saw Waya's reply."

"His reply?" Isumi asked, glancing at Waya.

Hikaru nodded. "He said he was an insei. I didn't know what an insei was..." He took a deep breath. "And that was how I knew that Waya-san was Zelda."

Waya was still frowning. "I think that's a crock of-" he began, but Isumi put a hand on his shoulder in warning. "Fine," he growled, turning away.

After a short silence, Kaneda, Fujimoto and Ohda made a concerted attempt to pretend that everything was normal. They did look curiously at Hikaru a few times, but Akira's warning look stopped them from further speculation.

They decided to discuss another kifū. Waya and Isumi exchanged comments, and Akira made Hikaru sit beside him, though Hikaru grimaced at having to sit seiza. The hunted look was fading from his face, though he still glanced at the other occupants of the room as though expecting an attack.

The discussion ended quickly since neither Waya nor Isumi were inclined to make any more comments, and Akira explained any confusing hands quickly and succinctly. He was aware that this

afternoon's study session had hardly been a success, and wondered if he should call things to a close early.

"Shindou-san, since you know Sensei so well, you must have played with him a lot of times," he heard Ohda say, clearly having decided that this was a good opportunity to find out more about Hikaru. Akira wouldn't be surprised if she had managed to obtain his birthdate, his blood type and his phone number by the end of the day.

Hikaru, looking surprised at being addressed, managed to nod heavily. "Yeah. I mean, yes, we play in the Go salon quite often."

"Really? What kind of handicap does Sensei give you?" Kaneda asked, joining in the conversation. He studied Hikaru as though he were sizing up an opponent.

"Um..." Hikaru looked at Akira as though to suggest that Akira should answer instead.

"Sensei is a pro, after all," Ohda said. "So, how many stones?"

"Er... two!"

"None."

Ohda blinked at Akira, who had replied at the same time. "You play with Shindou-san without any handicap?" she asked. "Do you play shidogo, then?"

"No!"

"No."

Now it was Kaneda's turn to blink at the two of them from behind his glasses. "Shindou-san, you don't take a handicap from Sensei, and Sensei doesn't play shidogo with you. Even with us, Sensei sometimes gives us two stones. You must be really good."

"I... er..." Hikaru was starting to turn red.

Waya's eyes were starting to narrow again, Akira noticed, and Isumi looked interested.

A knock at the door saved Hikaru from having to answer.

"Oh, it's Ochi," Ohda said in a whisper, and rolled her eyes.

Sure enough, it was Akira's oldest student--not really a student now, since he had already turned pro. Akira had coached him in the month before the pro exams, and Ochi had made him promise to let him join his father's study sessions if he passed.

Ochi entered, with formal apologies for being late. He had grown taller from the time Akira first knew him, though he still had the strange habit of locking himself in the toilet when he lost games, a practice that was very inconvenient for the others at the study sessions after an afternoon of Go and too much tea.

He saw Waya and Isumi first, and his eyes narrowed for a second; Akira remembered that all three of them had turned professional in the same year, and Isumi had been the opponent Ochi was most worried about. Nonetheless, Ochi greeted them and the other insei, if rather curtly. Then his frown fell on Hikaru. "And this is--"

"This is Sensei's boyfriend," Fujimoto said, seeming to enjoy the start of surprise that Ochi gave. "Yes, Sensei," he said to Akira, "we know that you're dating Shindou-san. Why else would you introduce him to us?"

Fujimoto was too much of a smart aleck for his own good.

Hikaru twitched.

Fujimoto went on, "His name is Shindou Hikaru. Shindou-san, this is Ochi Kosuke, 3-dan. You remember, he was in the Hokuto Cup tournament with Sensei, even though it was three years ago..."

"Thank you, Fujimoto," Akira said firmly.

Ochi's glare seemed to intensify at the mention of the Hokuto Cup. Only Akira had won both his games at that tournament; both Yashirou and Ochi had lost their games, a fact that seemed to rankle at Ochi no end.

Hikaru frowned slightly at the glare, but he said, "Pleased to meet you, Ochi-san."

"You're not a pro, are you?" Ochi asked instead.

Hikaru's uncertainty returned in force. "N-no," he said, glancing at Akira, and at the insei as well. He avoided looking at Waya.

"I was told, before I joined Touya-sensei's study sessions," Ochi said, his tone making it clear that he was referring to Akira's father, and not Akira, "that only *good* players could be admitted. But you're only an amateur."

"I..." Hikaru glanced at Akira again, his expression uncomfortable.

"Boyfriend or not, you have to prove that you are good enough."

"Ochi!" Akira admonished. "You can't-"

"Play a game with me."

"What?" Hikaru's jaw fell.

Ochi stalked forward. "I said, you have to play a game with me. Or are you too scared?"

That got Hikaru's attention. "Hell, no!" he said.

Sometimes, Akira wished that his boyfriend wasn't so easily baited.

"You don't know what you're asking, Ochi," Fujimoto said, his tone easy-going, as though he was trying to lighten the mood. "Sensei was just telling us that he plays with Shindou-san without any handicap!"

Correction. He was trying to pour napalm on fire. Akira decided that he was going to have a talk with Fujimoto soon.

Sure enough, Ochi's face darkened even more. "Then let's start. No handicap either," he said, seating himself opposite Hikaru, and starting to clear the Go board.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 4

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The sound of the Go board was finally cleared and the two players took their seats.

Akira watched his boyfriend warily. While Hikaru was brilliant at NetGo, he tended to get rattled easily while playing in person. Even though they had known each other for a long time, Hikaru had grumbled more than once that "Akira looks scary when he's serious", and his concentration would suffer. His Go faltered, and he played weak hands that led to him losing territory for nothing at all, leading Akira to yell at him.

As far as Akira knew, until the secret of Sai was revealed, Hikaru had played in person only with the members of the Go club at his high school, other young amateurs, and with Akira. He had played with Akira's father, Ogata and Ashiwara since, but this was the first time he had been challenged to play with another pro.

Even if it's only Ochi. Ochi had never bothered to hide the fact that he came to the study sessions only because they were "Touya Kouyo's study sessions." Akira found his attitude annoying, but did his best to ignore it.

"Please," Ochi said, glaring across the Go board and pushing his glasses all the way up the bridge of his nose so that his eyes seemed to bulge in an alarming fashion.

Hikaru shot a look around the room, as though he had suddenly realized what he had agreed to, and was regretting it. "P-please."

Firmly, Ochi placed a stone on the Go board.

The loud 'pachi' seemed to give Hikaru a start. He glanced at Ochi, and his hand went to the go-ke, extracting a white stone. He

promptly dropped it. The tiny click as the stone fell back into the goke made him swallow.

Hikaru's nervousness had returned.

Akira sighed inwardly.

Ochi's eyes seemed to gleam beneath his glasses.

Akira tried to will silent encouragement to Hikaru, noticing that the Waya and Isumi were watching as well: Isumi with a curious look, and Waya still with open suspicion at Hikaru, now mixed with puzzlement.

The insei were quiet, as though they sensed that any loud noise would make Hikaru bolt.

Hikaru shot a quick look at Akira, and took a deep breath slowly--the insei, particularly Ohda, seemed to be holding their breaths in tandem as well--and managed to hold on to his stone this time. He placed it on the star point with a slowness that almost seemed timid.

3-5. A common starting hand, Akira could almost hear Ochi think.

Glancing at his opponent, Ochi placed another black stone, starting to set out the limit of his territory. Hikaru placed another stone. The game seemed to settle after that, with Hikaru placing his stones more and more firmly.

"It's a Shusaku fuseki," Kaneda whispered to Fujimoto after about ten minutes had gone by. Fujimoto replied with a comment too soft to hear, both pairs of eyes focused on the Go board.

Which it was. Akira had a brief moment of panic, wondering if anyone else was going to suspect Hikaru of being Sai, but managed to calm himself down. The Shusaku fuseki was often used by Sai, but it was a common, if old-fashioned opening. He said nothing, a part of his mind automatically starting to analyze the game despite

his worry. Hikaru was being careful, but he played with increased confidence as the game went on, seeking to widen his territory by building on his earlier, very proper opening. So intent was Akira on reading the game that he almost missed the sudden jerk of Hikaru's shoulders somewhere around mid-game.

Hikaru?

All eyes were on Hikaru, even Ochi's, who had looked up as the stone between Hikaru's fingers dropped onto the tatami floor.

"Sorry," Hikaru whispered, and reclaimed the stone.

Ochi looked irritated.

Hikaru, on the other hand, looked as though he was about to say something, and only managed to restrain himself at the last minute. But his shoulders were shaking. With laughter, Akira realized. Suppressed laughter, and he tried not to frown. It was very improper to laugh during a game, but Hikaru was completely unrestrained when he played: laughing, joking, making silly remarks or shouting exaggerated declarations of war.

Akira thought it was because Hikaru was more accustomed to NetGo. Then again, Akira realized that both of them yelled and made disparaging remarks to each other when they played in the salon, too. *What a bad example I've set*, he chided himself.

"Um." There it was again, the sound of Hikaru heroically suppressing a snort.

Ochi looked up in irritation. "What is wrong with you?" he asked.

Hikaru shook his head. "I'm fine. Sorry." He didn't seem to be nervous at all, now. Instead, his eyes were now sparkling with amusement. "My turn, right?" He reached into the go-ke and plopped a stone on the Go board, right into Ochi's territory, the placement of his stone crooked and careless.

Ochi's eyes narrowed, and he replied with an offensive hand designed to strike at Hikaru's territory too.

Akira had already seen the spark of victory in Hikaru's eyes, and knew that he was going in for the kill. The other insei had noticed too. So had Waya and Isumi. They muttering to one another, and Akira caught something that sounded like 'Sai'. He winced, and hoped Hikaru wouldn't hear.

But Hikaru was too intent on the game now, and Akira knew that it was only a matter of time.

It wasn't the best Go Hikaru could have played. In fact, it was a telling sign that the game had proceeded to yose, when it should have ended earlier. The game was uncertain at the beginning, and jerky in mid-game, particularly after Hikaru seemed to have thought of something that made him suppress laughter. Ochi became angrier as he played, and it showed in his Go, full of aggressive hands and sharp reprisals.

Akira served more tea.

"I'm sorry, Sensei," Fujimoto said, helping him with the task. "I should have known you wouldn't have invited Shindou-san if he wasn't any good, even if he's your boyfriend." He glanced at the Go board. "Poor Ochi, beaten by an amateur. It couldn't have happened to a nicer-"

"Fujimoto."

"Sorry, Sensei." But Fujimoto sounded remarkably cheerful.

Kaneda pushed the door opened. "Sensei, Ochi's hogging the toilet again," he complained, "and I need to use it."

"You can use the other one near the kitchen," Akira said automatically. This happened all the time. Waya and Isumi, still

sitting by the Go board, looked up, and returned to their discussion of the finished game.

"Can't." Ohda popped her head in. "Shindou-san's in that one."

"Still?" Akira started to frown. Hikaru had left right after Ochi, as soon as the insei started to ask him about his Go, saying something about too much tea.

"Yeah. I don't know; he's making some kind of weird noise in there. I think you better come and look."

Akira nodded. "All right," he said, standing. "Excuse me," he said, though he was sure neither Waya nor Isumi heard him, catching sight of Fujimoto's grin as he walked out of the room towards the back of the house.

It was the same toilet, and Akira shook away the feeling of *déjà vu* as he stood in front of the closed door. Ohda was right: he could hear some weird noises in there. Hoping that this was not Hikaru's attempt to emulate Ochi, he knocked on the door and called, "Hikaru!"

To Akira's relief, the door opened to show Hikaru standing at the sink, holding on to it. His face and hair was wet, as though he had splashed his face with water, and his eyes were screwed shut. His face was red.

After a few seconds, Akira frowned. "Hikaru, you are *laughing*?"

A snort escaped Hikaru.

"Hikaru!" He stepped into the toilet, placing a hand on Hikaru's shoulder.

Another snort, much louder, and Hikaru suddenly turned around and buried his face in Akira's shoulder. His entire body was trembling.

Akira placed both hands on Hikaru's shoulders and tried to shake him gently. "Shindou Hikaru!" he said. "What's wrong with you? Stop laughing!"

Hikaru was still shaking against him, gasping for breath.

"Hikaru!" Akira shouted. Alarmed, he managed to pull Hikaru off, but before he could do anything else, Hikaru had taken hold of both his hands.

"Don't-don't slap me," Hikaru said, sounding as though he was trying to control himself. "I-I'm fine. I'm not hys-hysterical." His shaking and wheezing became more pronounced, and his face grew even redder.

"Except that you're laughing so hard that you can't catch your breath," Akira said, trying to hide his panic. He closed the door, using the few seconds to think as he heard Hikaru's gasps become more laboured. Not knowing what to do, he turned back and pulled Hikaru close, chest to chest. He began to rub his right hand down Hikaru's back, soothing him. Though his body, he could feel Hikaru's surprise, but the shaking stopped almost immediately.

After a while, he realized that he was rocking Hikaru gently as they stood there. Water was also dripping down Hikaru's wet hair, dampening Akira's shirt, and making a puddle on the floor. He tightened the hug for a second, and released Hikaru, staring into Hikaru's reddened eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked gently.

He could hear Hikaru swallow, then a soft, hesitant nod. "Yeah." Hikaru's voice was gravelly, as though he had been crying for hours.

"What happened?" Akira asked. "I know you thought of something funny, even during the game," he said, trying not to show his disapproval of that rudeness.

"Yeah." Hikaru repeated. He took a deep breath. "It was just something silly," he said, regaining his self-control. "I came in here to have a laugh, and then..."

Akira waited.

"I just wondered what Sai would have thought. Me, playing with a pro. A real pro, you know! Well, except for you and Ogata-san and Ashiwara-san, and Touya-sensei, but they don't count because I've been playing with them as Sai and-" Hikaru stopped, peering down at Akira's finger between his lips.

"Breathe."

Hikaru reached up to touch Akira's hand, before pulling it down. "I'm calm, I'm calm," he said, a little too quickly, but he paused to take another deep breath. "And I remembered Ochi's NetGo name, and I wondered what Sai would have said, and I knew Sai would have loved to play pros for real, instead of just NetGo, and I knew he'd have loved it, and I missed him, and missed him, and all of it got mixed up with Ochi's NetGo name, and... I'm repeating myself, aren't I?" He pressed Akira's finger back onto his own lips and waited.

Akira remained silent, and lowered his hand, waiting while Hikaru's breathing evened out again. "What was Ochi's NetGo name?" he asked, and was surprised at himself.

Hikaru blinked. "Um... Oh." His grin appeared suddenly, the one that always reminded Akira of the first time they met. "I recognized his style. He calls himself 'Big-Player' on the internet." A chortle escaped him. "I'm fine!" he said quickly.

" 'Big-Player'?" Akira echoed. He didn't recall seeing the name among the list of Sai's opponents; then again, Sai had played with so many people over the years. It was more amazing that Hikaru could identify a player by his Go style. And if his English tutor was right, 'Big-Player' actually meant...

"Akira, are you laughing?"

"No!"

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 5

------(5)-----

They had been inside for nearly half an hour and Ochi was still in the other toilet.

Kaneda told them, just before he rushed into the now-vacant toilet. He had been sporting a look of barely concealed impatience, which turned rapidly to embarrassment, when he saw Akira and Hikaru. Sometimes Akira forgot that Kaneda was only thirteen years old.

"In the other toilet?" Hikaru asked. "What does he mean?"

Akira explained.

Hikaru's eyes widened. "Really? What does he do in there?"

"I don't know," Akira said, shrugging. "But Fujimoto and the others said they always hear tapping sounds on the door." He shook his head. "Never mind. Are you all right now? We should be getting back." Actually, he wished they didn't have to, but he didn't want to worry Fujimoto and Ohda, or make Waya and Isumi even more suspicious.

Hikaru looked worried, but he nodded. "Yeah, I guess. What does that Waya have against you, anyway?"

Akira had his suspicions, but there was no way he could explain without sounding like an arrogant bully. Explaining that he was too strong? Impossible. He said, "I don't really know." He walked in the direction of the Go study, and Hikaru followed him.

Ohda looked up from where she was talking to Fujimoto when they entered. "Oh, you're back. We were starting to worry," she said. "What took you so long?"

Akira noticed Waya looking at them. "We were talking about the game, and forgot," he said apologetically, going for the simplest excuse.

Hikaru gave him a look of confusion. "What game... oh," he said as his gaze fell on the Go board he and Ochi had just played. "Yeah, we were talking about the game," he parroted, trying to sound nonchalant. He turned to Akira. "Right?"

"Yes." Akira said, though inwardly he was touched by Hikaru's utter inability to tell a simple lie. "As I said just now, you played a sloppy game, Hikaru." He watched as Hikaru stiffened with familiar indignation. It was almost too easy.

"Hey, I won, didn't I?" Hikaru said, injured.

"You played some great hands, Shindou-san," Ohda said. "You just went right over Ochi!"

"Yeah," Fujimoto pushed himself forward, still seated. "Did Sensei teach you those killer hands?"

"Er..."

"Not fair, Sensei," Fujimoto said mournfully. "Sensei never teaches us the good stuff. You're holding out on us, Sensei. Favouring your boyfriend."

"No, Akira wouldn't-" Hikaru realized he was being baited, and gave a weak chuckle. He glanced at Akira, and sat down beside Fujimoto. "I'm not using any strategy that Akira hasn't taught you, really. You see-" He stopped, blinking as Isumi nodded at him to join him and Waya. With a wary look, he went and sat down. After a glance at each other, Ohda and Fujimoto also sat down at the Go board with Isumi and Waya.

Hikaru took a moment to stare at the reproduced game, and Akira could see the frown on his face that showed that he was mentally

reviewing it. "Oh man, it was totally sloppy, wasn't it?" he groaned.

Akira sat down beside him. "Didn't I say that?"

"Yeah, but you're always saying that," Hikaru grumbled. "I should never have tried to extend here," he pointed at the corner.

"Why not? You did it so you could attack the bottom left, right?" Fujimoto asked.

"Yeah, but I could have just attacked from the top, see. If I extend here... instead I wasted precious hands on a ko fight there!"

"Attack from the top? But it's White's territory here," Ohda said.

"Not really. In another five hands I could have surrounded White's stones and used it to fence the territory here."

"Another five hands? That fast?" Akira asked. "I don't see how..."

"Sure. Just cut off White here, before he can run away."

"But..."

"You don't see it because you prefer to attack first," Hikaru said. "But you don't need to do that here, White is hopeless here anyway..." Hikaru trailed away. His cheeks grew red. "Erm. Ochi-san."

Sure enough, it was Ochi at the door. With Kaneda. Kaneda scrambled into the room and took a seat next to Fujimoto, glaring at him and Ohda. "You started discussing it with Shindou-san already?" he asked, miffed. "You said you'd wait for me!"

"Well, you went out for so long just to take a piss!" Fujimoto said.

"Not my fault," Kaneda crossed his arms, hunching in on himself. "I'm not the one who spends so much time locked in a toilet, like some people. Who knows what they do inside?"

Ochi bristled. "What did you say?" he asked.

"I meant Sensei and Shindou-san!" Kaneda retorted. "They were inside for the longest time-" He glanced about in confusion as Fujimoto started to snicker. "What?" he asked defensively. "They were!"

Fujimoto was pressing both hands to his mouth in a bid to muffle his laughter. "You said you were talking about the game, Sensei? In the toilet?" he managed to ask.

Akira tried without success to glare at him. "It wasn't what you think," he said, before he realized what he had said. "That is..."

Hikaru made a sound between a chuckle and a cough, while Ochi scowled even more fiercely.

"Can we get back to the game?" Waya spoke out, a hint of impatience in his voice. "Isumi has something to ask."

Akira gave the insei a warning glare. "Be serious, you three," he said to the insei.

Kaneda protested. "But I didn't-"

Fujimoto jabbed him in the ribs to silence him.

Akira sat up straighter. "I'm sorry, Isumi-san. What is it?"

"Isumi wanted to ask Shindou-san, not you," Waya said, giving Akira an annoyed look.

"Waya!" Isumi said. He gave Waya a quelling look and nodded slightly at Akira, as though in apology. "I was just wondering why you played 'jump' over here?" he asked Hikaru, pointing to the top right corner.

Hikaru stared, and look chagrined. "I counted wrongly. In fact, I played wrongly in so many places!" he said with a groan. "There,

when I should have strengthened over here. And here, and here...

To Akira's relief, the talk returned to Go. Even though Waya gave Hikaru increasingly thoughtful looks as it went on, he didn't say anything else.

The study session ended without a hitch.

Akira waited as Hikaru sat down beside him in his room. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Huh?" Focused on searching for something in his bag, Hikaru looked up. "What do you mean?"

"I know the study session wasn't as smooth-going as I hoped," Akira said, meeting his eyes. "But tell me it wasn't that bad?"

Hikaru gave a shudder. "Well, your students aren't too bad, except for Ochi--his real name's much better, by the way--but I could have done without being accused of Sai by that Waya guy. I nearly had a heart attack!" He frowned. "Do you think he bought the story about me knowing he was Zelda?"

Not a chance in hell . "I hope so," Akira said.

"It doesn't matter. It doesn't look like he likes you. Maybe we'll never see him again."

"Easy for you to say," Akira said. "I still have to play with him in games."

"He has a funny way of playing," Hikaru said, looking up at the ceiling. He caught Akira's look. "I've watched his games a few times. Sometimes he goes all out, if the opponents are weaker than he is, and sometimes he plays too carefully, like he can't trust himself, when his opponent is strong."

"You don't like that," Akira said, hearing the note of puzzlement in Hikaru's voice.

Hikaru shot him an incredulous look. "Of course not!" he said. "It's Go. You have to go all out, no matter how strong your opponents are! Humble is for when you surrender."

"You would think that," Akira said.

"Don't you?"

"Of course."

Hikaru snorted. "Except you're never humble when you surrender. You glare even more fiercely. At me! Your eyes are not lasers, you know." He leant closer to Akira. "But it wasn't as bad as I thought."

"So you'll come again?"

"What!" The yelp of surprise was not without panic.

"Please? I've wanted to introduce you to the other pros for ages."

"But-" Hikaru subsided. After a while, he said, "I'll think about it."

"All right." Somehow, Akira found himself reaching out with an arm and pulling Hikaru closer, letting their heads touch and their hair mingle. They relaxed in silence.

"Thanks for holding me up today," Hikaru whispered.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 6

------(6)-----

The second, and third of the study sessions had passed without further incident, and Hikaru had finally relaxed enough to joke with the insei, and even to talk to the older pros who hadn't attended that first study session. He played little, and spent more time observing and discussing games instead.

Not surprisingly, Ohda was the one who asked, first. Hikaru had already revealed his birthdate, blood type, height, and weight, with a slightly uncomfortable look, but he looked truly taken aback to be asked his ambition.

"What do I want to do?" Hikaru asked.

"You're graduating from high school this year, aren't you?" she asked. She looked far too innocent.

"Yeah, I am," Hikaru said. "My parents said to go to cram school and try for Tokyo University..." he trailed off, lost in thought.

Ohda nodded. "But you don't want to do that?" she asked.

"Not really," Hikaru confessed. The third session had ended early, and it was just the insei, and Touya, in the room.

Fujimoto sidled up from where he was cleaning the Go boards with Kaneda. "Really, Shindou-san? Then what do you want to do?" he asked, and exchanged a look with Kaneda.

Akira frowned. He thought he knew what the insei were getting at, and couldn't decide whether to get them to stop. He could read ahead, but he didn't know Hikaru's moves.

"Well... I haven't really thought about it," Hikaru paused, before a bright smile appeared on his face. "I know!" he said, snapping his fingers.

Ohda leant forward, her face eager. "What?"

"I've thought about it before, but it always seemed so difficult, and so unusual..." Hikaru said. "I don't know what my parents will think of it."

"Think of what?" Fujimoto and Kaneda asked together.

"I want to be a ramen chef!" Hikaru said, his smile widening.

Akira felt like hitting himself on the forehead.

Stunned silence filled the room.

After a while, Fujimoto croaked, " *What ?*"

Hikaru looked incredibly pleased with himself. "A ramen chef!" he repeated. "That sounds great, doesn't it? That oyaji Kawamura, who runs a ramen stand near my school, always said that he needed an apprentice."

Kaneda's glasses had slid past his nose, and Ohda's mouth was opened as though in a silent scream.

Akira looked at Fujimoto, and saw that he was gasping silently like a goldfish out of water.

"... his soya sauce stock is to die for..." Hikaru stopped rhapsodizing about his favourite ramen flavour, and blinked. "What's the matter with you three?"

The three insei failed to answer him. Akira felt like giggling. Perhaps he was hysterical.

"Hey..." Hikaru started to look worried, as he reached out to nudge Fujimoto gently on the shoulder. There was no reaction. He did the same with Kaneda, with the same lack of response. They might as well have been mannequins. "Hey, what's wrong?" he looked at them again, before turning to Akira. "Your insei, Akira. I didn't break them, did I?" he asked.

"Shindou... Hikaru," Akira managed to say. "Are you sure?"

"Sure? I didn't do anything, I swear!"

"I mean, about being a ramen chef."

"Not really..."

The three insei came out of their shock-imposed stasis at that, giving one another wide-eyed looks that turned speculative as they looked at Hikaru.

"No?" Akira asked.

"Well... Oyaji Kawamura may not want an apprentice like me..."

Fujimoto buried his face in his hands.

"But..." Ohda's voice was turning sharp, as it always did, when she got agitated. Or more likely this time, horrified. "What about Go?!"

"I'm still playing Go, of course," Hikaru said, as though he didn't see why that was up for debate. He really didn't, Akira realized.

Fujimoto looked up. "Shindou-san, you're a very good player," he said.

Hikaru smiled uncertainly. "Er. Thank you, you're very kind, Fujimoto-san. But why..."

"Then why do you want to be a ramen chef?" Fujimoto was trying not to shout.

"Because I like ramen."

Fujimoto opened his mouth to reply, but found himself unable to say anything.

"Hikaru," Akira said, trying to remain calm. "Liking ramen doesn't mean you don't have to be a ramen chef, you know."

"I know," Hikaru said. "But what else can I do?" he said. "I'm not really very good at studying--at least not all that math and science and stuff. And history and languages are really hard." He looked around at the insei. "You think so too, right?"

Akira didn't know who coined the phrase 'elephant in the room', but he decided that it was appropriate, at this time. "Hikaru—" he began.

"I hate you!" Kaneda shouted suddenly, and ran from the room.

It was difficult to make an angry exit when the doors were sliding doors, but Kaneda nearly managed it, Akira thought.

"Kaneda!" Fujimoto shouted after him. He frowned at Hikaru, but said to Akira. "Sensei, I'll go and talk to him." He stood up and went to the door.

"I'll go too," Ohda said, joining him.

The room contained only the two of them now. Three, including Sai, Akira thought. He suddenly realized why Hikaru might not have considered making Go a more permanent part of his future. Sai, and Go, were literally part of Hikaru--almost like an arm, or a leg. One did not consult one's leg, or arm, about the future and the decisions about a career.

"I said something to upset them, didn't I?" Hikaru said, looking at him. He looked upset, as well, and kept looking towards the doors, as though expecting the insei to come back at any moment. Hikaru never took the sudden departures of other people well.

Oh, Sai, Akira said in his mind to the ghost, wherever he was. Look at what Hikaru has become, because of you. Look at how he has changed, to protect you. He reached out and took Hikaru's hand. "It's all right. They were surprised, that's all. I'll speak to them," he said.

"But..."

"Shh." Akira squeezed his hand. "You really want to be a ramen chef?" he asked, trying to lighten Hikaru's mood. "I thought you were a lousy cook. Remember that time when you tried to make cookies?"

"Hey!" Hikaru protested. "That was only once!" He sobered almost immediately. "Are they... are they afraid that I'll stop playing Go?"

Akira sighed. "Something like that," he said. Kaneda had developed a case of hero-worship towards Hikaru after that game with Ochi, and Akira thought he could understand the feeling of betrayal at Hikaru's words. He remembered the time he confronted Hikaru outside the internet cafe, when he had accused Hikaru of being Sai.

"If you are really Sai, you would have turned pro and won yourself Go titles!"

"Thank you for taking the words right out of my mouth."

He had stopped then, realizing that he was wrong. He was still wrong, even when he knew the truth now. Hikaru was not Sai, even though he played as Sai on the internet.

All things considered, the shock of learning about Hikaru's NetGo incarnation as Sai had worn off very quickly. Akira thought it was because he had suspected the connection between them more than once, that there really was another personality--another intelligence--inside Hikaru. Yet, the more he was with Hikaru, the less Akira wanted Hikaru to be Sai. Sai was experienced, serious and intellectual, while Hikaru was loud, instinct-driven, and easy-going. Yet it was Hikaru who took on the weight of their combined brilliance. Akira sometimes wondered how he carried it all.

"Well, I *won't* ."

The fierce tone took Akira by surprise, and he looked up at Hikaru's face.

"I won't," Hikaru repeated, his eyes dimmed on a distant memory. "I won't stop playing Go. Sai would be disappointed in me, if I did that."

You have to play for yourself, Hikaru, Akira thought to himself.

"Hikaru has the right to make his own decisions," Akira said to the insei the next day, "You're not to bother him about this, understand?"

"But Sensei, Shindou-san's Go is..." Fujimoto started.

Akira stared at him until he subsided. "I know," he said. "But it's his future; he must decide for himself."

"But Sensei..." Ohda started. Kaneda sat beside her, his face dull with anger.

Akira shook his head, a little. "How did you decide to make Go your future in the first place?" he asked, directing the question at the three of them, but looking at him.

Kaneda opened his mouth to speak, and suddenly looked down. When Akira first started to teach him, as an amateur, Kaneda's parents had been pushing him into English chess tournaments as a new prodigy. Within months of Go instruction, however, Kaneda had decided to give up chess to devote all his time to Go. It was a shock to his parents, but Kaneda had got his way in the end. Now he nodded. "Yes, Sensei," he said softly.

"Kaneda!" Fujimoto protested, but subsided after staring at his fellow-insei's face. "All right," he said.

"Ohda?" Akira asked.

"Yes, Sensei," she said.

That was the best he was going to get, Akira thought. "You three should concentrate on your own Go, instead of worrying about other people," he said. "The Wakashijisen is coming up; you need to prepare for it. All three of you are eligible to enter this year." Only the top sixteen insei were invited to the tournament organized for young pros and insei.

Three nods, and Kaneda and Ohda exchanged looks. Last year, the two of them had played against each other.

Akira nodded, telling himself to concentrate on Go now. "Good. Kaneda, you play with me. Fujimoto, the Go board, please."

Akira thought he should have expected it, but when Hikaru complained about someone leaving strange messages for him, it still surprised him.

"What kind of messages?" he asked Hikaru.

Hikaru shrugged. "Go messages. Weird ones. I don't know if they are to annoy me or to tell me something. It's so mysterious! I wish this person would stop."

With an unsettling feeling, Akira suddenly recalled seeing the insei in a huddle after he had talked to them. He had asked them not to bother Hikaru, but what if they had decided to approach Hikaru anyway? The insei had strong opinions about Hikaru's choice of career, and seemed determined to change his mind.

Akira decided to see the messages for himself. Maybe it wasn't the insei?

"No way. You can't play over here!" Hikaru was saying when Akira approached the room that served as Go Club's meeting room.

"Huh? Why not?" Someone, probably Hikaru's student, was asking.

Unlike the chemistry lab that had served as the Haze Junior Go Club's meeting room, the Haze Senior High Go Club met in an unused classroom that doubled as a storeroom for old computer equipment.

The senior section of Akira's old school, Kaio, had offered Hikaru a place on the basis of his Go skills, but Hikaru had decided to go where most of his friends went. He ended up being the default Go instructor in the Go Club.

Hikaru sounded irritated. "I said before, you can't play too high at this stage; you won't have enough stones to defend your territory."

"So what?"

"So what?" Hikaru echoed. "So you'll be dead in about twenty hands... no, ten!"

"Are you sure? I've seen you play like that before, you know." The other person sounded thoroughly skeptical.

"Yeah, but that's me."

Akira could imagine Hikaru saying that, with his tongue stuck out like a child.

There was a loud sputter. "W-what kind of reasoning is that?"

"It's... anyway, do as I say, not as I do, okay?" Hikaru said. "Just... just take my word for it!"

Akira smiled in spite of himself. Hikaru tended to browbeat his fellow members, and had been taken aback when he observed Akira teaching the first time. *"You're so... educational, Akira."*

Hikaru continued to talk. "See, here, and here..."

Raising a hand, Akira knocked gently on the door.

"... and here. Totally insane. Man, are you randomly placing the stones or what?"

Akira knocked again, more loudly this time.

"Shindou."

"And you ignored the group over here!"

There was the sound of giggling, probably from the girls in the Go Club. Hikaru liked to complain that girls didn't play as well as boys and that they talked too much, but Akira thought they certainly made the Go Club livelier.

"Shindou, someone's at the door," a feminine voice said.

Hikaru growled. "Argh! I'm trying to teach here," he declared. "Who is it?"

Akira could hear loud stomping all the way to the door, then Hikaru pulled open the door.

"What do you want-" Hikaru started, before his eyes lighted up.
"Akira!"

Akira couldn't help smiling at Hikaru's obvious welcome. "I finished work early, and thought I'd come and find you first. Is it all right?" he asked, though he was sure of the answer.

"Of course it is!" Hikaru pushed the door opened further, and stepped back.

It was a full meeting of the Haze Go Club, Akira thought to himself. Eight members in all, which made it one of the smallest clubs in the school, but then Go had never been as popular as in Kaio. Hikaru's 'student' was a tall, broad-shouldered young man who looked as

though he was more comfortable holding baseball bat than small Go stones.

Akira entered and nodded a greeting at them with a slight dip of his head.

"Touya-kun," Fujisaki waved at him, where she was seated at the window. "Welcome! Glad you could come."

"Fujisaki-san," he said. "Mitani-san," he added to a boy with reddish-brown wavy hair opposite her.

Mitani said, "Good, now you can shut him up." He nodded towards Hikaru.

Hikaru turned around at that. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

Mitani smirked. "I mean, you'll stop shouting. Other people are trying to play, you know. Did you think I was asking him to do something mushy like kiss you? In your dreams, Shindou."

"I wasn't shouting," Hikaru said loftily, ignoring the second part of Mitani's speech.

There was simultaneous laughter from the occupants at the two Go boards in the corner. Akira identified Koike, Tsuda, Kaneko and Natsumi and smiled at them. Hikaru was lucky, he reflected, to be in a Go club that accepted him. "Ike-san," he said to the tallest, and newest member of the club. It was he who had been arguing with Hikaru.

"Hi, Touya-san," Ike said. "Maybe you can explain to me why I'm not supposed to play like Shindou," he said, making a face at Hikaru. " 'I told you so' isn't a good enough reason for me."

"Hah!" Hikaru defended himself sturdily. "You're just incapable of appreciating my genius. And Akira's a professional, you know. If you

get him to teach you, you have to pay him."

Ike looked startled. "Really?" he asked.

"Yeah!" Hikaru answered on Akira's behalf. "How do you think Go pros make a living?"

The look on Ike's face was one of sudden realization. "That doesn't sound too bad. So that's how..." he murmured, before turning to Hikaru. "I thought you had to do something incredibly difficult," he said.

"Not if you are as good at Go as Akira!" Hikaru said, bouncing with pride as he pulled Akira closer to him.

Ike frowned. "Then why..."

Akira interrupted before he could complete the question. Really, he was getting too good at predicting questions put to Hikaru about his future. "Hikaru, you said you had something to show me," he said softly. Besides, he suspected that Hikaru hadn't told anyone else about being a ramen chef, and the news would probably give the members of the Go Club heart attacks.

"Oh, right," Hikaru said, turning towards the door, where most of the members had placed their bags. "Why what?" he asked absently.

Akira took the opportunity to shake his head quietly at Ike, who said, "Nothing." He gave Akira a sharp look.

"Huh." Hikaru rummaged in his bag, and finally pulled out a small sheaf of papers, pushing them towards Akira. "See? It doesn't make sense!"

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 7

------(7)-----

Taken aback, Akira took a moment to verify what he was seeing. Hikaru laid out the pieces of paper one by one--a few looked as though they had been crumpled and later smoothed out--on a nearby table, talking all the time. "I got the first one in my shoe locker two weeks ago, and new ones keep appearing in it! I've asked around," he said with an aggrieved air, "but no one knows who is doing it. I thought it was one of them," he nodded at his club members.

A chorus of denials and protests came from occupants of the room.

Hikaru pretended to cower, and had to duck a Go stone thrown by Mitani. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry!" he said, and turned to Akira again. "But it wasn't. And on Friday I found one placed under the door!" He indicated the door from which Akira had just come through. "So, what do you think?"

Akira counted six pieces of paper, each identical: white sheets of paper, of the same size, neatly printed, with no name or identifying mark on them. "These... are kifu," he said.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Hikaru said.

"You said they were messages," Akira pointed out.

"They are!" Hikaru insisted. "See, this one says 'protect the right', while this one says 'atari on tengen'. And this one is 'dragon under threat'," he indicated the long, sprawling formation spreading across the kifu.

Akira made himself look down at the kifu, before Hikaru noticed him staring.

"... and this one says 'ko threat at the rear', even though White had other intentions..." Hikaru said, and Akira looked up again to see him frowning at the kifu held carefully between thumb and finger, looking the way he did whenever he discussed Go with Akira. "What do you think?" he pushed it at Akira.

I think you're just a tiny bit obsessed with Go, Akira thought, but he looked carefully at the kifu. It was a game in progress, he noted. The sequence of hands, the captured stones, and the way Black was being smartly and relentlessly overpowered--they were all carefully labelled. Recognition hit him. "Hikaru, this is a game that Sai played!" he said, much louder than he had intended.

The other members of the Go club looked up at his outburst. "A game that who played?" Mitani asked from where he was sitting.

Hikaru stiffened, while Akira said immediately, "It's nothing. I was mistaken about something I saw here. Sorry I disturbed you."

Mitani eyed him, and gave Hikaru a suspicious look, before he snorted and turned to Fujisaki, raising his voice to talk about Go, deliberately ignoring them.

Akira heaved a sigh of relief, and turned to Hikaru with the intention of exploring this discovery.

Hikaru had a very strange look on his face.

He looked as though he had been about to laugh at what Akira had said, and had changed his mind suddenly. It was not an expression Akira often saw on his face; usually, Hikaru reacted the way he felt, without pause or even much thought. Akira opened his mouth to ask him what it was, when all of a sudden, he recalled what he had just said before Mitani's interruption. He felt himself flushing with awkwardness, wanting to apologize but not knowing how, and wishing he could take back those words. "Hikaru, I'm sor-"

Hikaru touched his lips with a hand, cutting off his words. "It's okay," he said. "Just took me back. I remember when you used to be all excited, each time you played with-" he stopped, and the strange look came to his face again. "Or when you saw a game played by-" he stopped again. "Damn it, I sound so stupid," he muttered darkly.

"I should have remembered-" Akira said, but Hikaru was shaking his head.

"No, no, it's okay. Look at it this way," he said. "Less risk of accidental exposure," he said, trying to smile, but failing. He seemed to shake off the strange look after a few seconds, though, regaining his normal, easy-going expression. "Yeah, some of these games were with Sai," he said.

Of course Hikaru would know that.

Akira tried to match his tone. "How many of them?" he began to look through the other kifu.

"Well... all but two." Hikaru turned away to survey the kifu on the table, and picked out two. "These two. I think this one is you," he said, indicating one with a slight flick of his chin.

Akira found himself looking at a familiar game. "This is a game I played with Murakami-san," he said in astonishment, naming one of his opponents in the third preliminary round for the Kisei title. "We played this game last month."

Hikaru's eyebrows rose. "This person is a pro?" he said, with an air of sudden comprehension. "I recognize his style. He plays on the internet as well, but he calls himself 'GoGo-Gadget' on the Net Go website, and he ranked himself as an amateur."

"Yes, it's him," Akira said, not letting himself be distracted Hikaru's quick identification of Murakami with the latter's NetGo name. "Eight-dan, and one of the contenders for the Kisei title." Akira had played with him only last month.

"Oh." Hikaru's eyes narrowed for a second, as though he was making a mental note about Murakami. Akira had the feeling that it would be instructive to watch out for Sai's game with 'GoGo-Gadget' in the near future.

"And this one..." Hikaru pushed another kifu at him as well, as though he thought Akira would recognize it.

Akira frowned. Black's style leapt out at him right away, but there was something about it that bothered him. He knew this style, but the version he knew was considerably evolved from the one in this particular game.

"It's Touya-sensei, playing Black," Hikaru said.

Akira nodded. "With-"

"Ichiryu," Hikaru said.

"Ichiryu-sensei," Akira said to Hikaru. "But the style is old."

"It's an old game, one that Touya-sensei played before he retired."

"Oh." His father had retired not long after that Net Go game with Sai. He had not played many Net Go games in that short time between that game, losing the Juudan title to Ogata, and announcing his retirement. He had, of course, played many more games after his retirement.

"That's the oldest game among all these," Hikaru said. He blinked. "I wonder why the sender sent this one."

"And why most of the kifu are of games Sai played," Akira said. His heart was beating fast. "Do you think it's someone who knows that you-"

Hikaru shook his head. "No!" he exclaimed, but he looked as horrified as Akira felt. "Can't be," he said. "I've been really careful,"

he said. "I can't let other people know. They'll want to know how I learnt all that Go, and if I tell the truth, they won't believe me, and..."

Akira placed his hand on Hikaru's shoulder to calm him. "Shh. It was just a thought."

"But-" Hikaru paused when Akira gave him a little shake. "I've been trying to figure what all the messages mean," he said. "But I'm not getting anywhere."

"Maybe they aren't messages."

"What? But they are!" Hikaru said, pushing the kifu at him. "See, even this one, when there's a threat to cut! And-" his face changed.

"Hikaru?" Akira asked when Hikaru said nothing for several seconds.

"I've just realized," Hikaru said. "In all these games, Black is being threatened by White."

Akira looked at the sheets of kifu again, before looking at Hikaru, "You're right."

They discussed it further, but neither of them could think of any other explanation. Hikaru dismissed the Go Club at precisely four, managing to hide his mood from even Fujisaki, who was planning to go out with Mitani, and bade them a cheerful goodbye.

They were just leaving the school gates when Hikaru groaned dramatically, "Oh damn, it's him again." He tugged at Akira's arm, pushing him towards the trees outside the school as though to avoid detection from someone approaching the school.

"Hikaru, what-" Akira found Hikaru's lips on his before he could complete his question.

Hikaru wasn't really kissing him, though. He only placed his lips on Akira's, though he wrapped his arms around Akira's waist and pulled him close.

Akira felt horribly embarrassed and exposed, expecting someone to appear at any moment. He was not used to doing this in public. Should Hikaru be doing this in public? After all, he was still wearing his uniform. All it took was a teacher, or even a member of the public... the part of his mind that was still pondering those earth-shattering questions stuttered to a stop when Hikaru started to nibble gently at the corner of his mouth.

Hikaru smelt of sweat and dust, from the classroom--and underneath that the faint chemical smell of the numerous hair products that he slathered on his hair daily. Involuntarily, Akira tightened his hands on Hikaru's uniform, gripping handfuls of the thick, black material, and pulled him close, in turn.

But Hikaru paused after a few seconds, to Akira's secret regret. "Let's hope he won't notice it's me," he whispered, his eyes flickering to the side before focusing on Akira again.

Akira held him off at those words. "Who are you talking about?" he asked.

Hikaru grimaced. "Him! That person who came to that study session the first time."

"But who-" Embarrassment was returning, when it looked like there wasn't going to be more kissing.

"That only works on TV, you know." A new voice interrupted his question. "Besides, your hair is rather distinctive, Shindou-san."

"Damn," Hikaru said, and straightened, turning towards the speaker and allowing Akira a glimpse of him.

The look of surprise on Waya's face was entertaining, at least. "It's you?" Waya exclaimed, looking from him to Hikaru. "Not someone I was expecting."

Hikaru raised his eyebrows. "What, did you think I go about kissing strangers? Of course it's Akira."

"I didn't expect it, that's all," Waya said. He glanced at the Haze school building. "Touya-san was from an exclusive school in the past. Kaio, wasn't it? I didn't expect him to come to a place like this." There was something that looked like a sneer in his face.

Hikaru bristled. "What did you mean by that?" he asked.

Waya looked at his face, and made a visible effort to restrain himself. "Nothing," he said.

Hikaru scowled at him. "Good. Now, what do you want?"

"I've thought about what you said the last time," Waya said. He seemed to brace himself. "3-6."

Hikaru said, "5-1." Waya's expression said that he had been expecting this. "9-9."

"3-1."

"5-12."

"6-2," Hikaru said almost immediately, without even missing a beat.

Waya looked frustrated. "15-3."

"11-1." Hikaru seemed to derive huge satisfaction from Waya's reaction. He bumped shoulders gently with Akira to get his attention, and winked when Akira turned to him.

Luckily, Waya did not seem to notice. "10-8." His voice was a little shaky.

Hikaru had an expression of pure, malicious delight on his face. "3... 18," he said, pronouncing the second part with relish.

The look that Waya gave him was pure shock. He stared at Hikaru for long seconds. "I... I..."

Hikaru shrugged with exaggerated casualness. "Feel free to surrender anytime," he said.

"Not yet!" Waya said, but he sounded helpless. His gaze fell on Akira. "He's not helping you, is he?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Hikaru crossed his arms. "I fight my own battles, thank you very much."

"Huh." Waya looked at them for another long moment, then nodded. "I'll need to think about this," he said to Hikaru, ignoring Akira, before turning away and walking rapidly in the other direction.

"Uh, sure," Hikaru said to his back. Akira was sure he waited only until Waya was out of earshot before he started laughing. "Did you see his face? Did you? Did you?" he asked Akira, between guffaws.

"The last time?" Akira asked, keeping his voice soft. "And what was that all about?"

"I'll tell you on the way." Hikaru leaned towards him, and took his hand, leading them in the direction of his home. "It was the weirdest thing. He turned up at the school gate the first time... I think it was the Monday after that practice session."

"How did he know that you're from Haze?" Akira asked.

Hikaru shrugged. "He said he checked the regional Go school tournament records. Haze has won the regional tournaments for the last three years, and the players' names are always recorded. I guess that's how?" he said with a dubious air.

"Then what was that, all about? That was Go, right?" Akira asked, seeking confirmation.

"Yeah," Hikaru said. "It was just weird. First he accused me of being well, Sai," he gave Akira a mischievous look, and for once the shadows that always came into his eyes at the mention of Sai were not there. Akira's heart gave a little flip at that--he had longed to do that, one day. "Nearly gave me a heart attack. Right here," Hikaru continued, putting a hand over his chest and making a fist.

"That's your stomach," Akira said, and moved his hand two inches higher.

"Oh. Thanks." Hikaru flashed him a smile, and went on with his story. "Anyway, I was denying it like crazy, when, all of a sudden, he said, '15-4!'"

"What did you do?"

"You need to ask? Of course I said, '4-3!'"

"Of course," Akira said weakly.

"We must have looked like idiots, shouting numbers at each other. After about ten hands, he said he needed to think, and left. I thought that was the end of it. Two days later, he came again. And again." Akira worked it out. "So the two of you are continuing that game?"

"Yeah." Hikaru shrugged. "It's a damn nuisance. At least he approaches me when he's sure that other people aren't around." He looked up at the sky, frowning at the clouds. Finally he said, "Let's go, Akira."

Hikaru was yelling at his laptop when Akira re-entered the room.

"That was the stupidest thing I have ever seen!" Hikaru raged, his eyes hard as he stared at the screen, seemingly ready to climb through it.

"I was wondering what was making all that noise, from downstairs," Akira said, walking closer. He had taken it upon himself to help with the dishes, to please Hikaru's mother. "It was you, after all. I'm surprised your mother didn't say anything."

"Oh, she's used to it," Hikaru said. "Back when Sai... back when I was younger, I used to shout even more loudly. She was convinced that I was talking to myself, instead of to... well. I guess it became a habit." His gaze not leaving the screen, Hikaru reached out in Akira's direction and felt the air blindly, before he finally touched Akira's waist and then his arm, and pulled him forward.

"Hikaru, I don't think your chair is big enough..." Akira began to protest, and found himself on Hikaru's lap. He met Hikaru's eyes.

Hikaru was grinning. "Now it is," he said, and buried his face in Akira's neck.

A soft 'beep' came from the laptop, and Hikaru straightened abruptly, his gaze focusing on the screen immediately. "Are you totally stupid, or what?" he shouted.

Having Hikaru yell into one's ear was extremely uncomfortable. Akira shook his head, and started to get up, but Hikaru's arms tightened around him. "See, he could have gone for the corner, instead he forgot to guard one of his groups! I'm going to flatten you, and it'd serve you right," he said, and his hand left Akira's waist to go to the front of the laptop, where he tapped out his response. Another small 'beep'.

Akira shook his head, and removed himself gently from Hikaru's grip. He pulled up another chair, sat down beside Hikaru, and observed the game. "You aren't playing as Sai," he said.

Hikaru shook his head. "Nah," he said easily. "I'm not in the mood today. I'm playing as myself."

"You're using your own name?" Akira asked. He had never seen the name 'Shindou Hikaru' on the NetGo website, or any of the major Go websites.

"Not everyone uses his real name, you know," Hikaru said. "Besides, 'Hikaru' was already taken," he said. "Maybe my parents should have given me a name that's not so common," he mused.

Akira scrutinized the screen. Hikaru was playing White, he had noticed. "You're 'Starmaker'?" he said. He had seen that name a few times before, but he had never approached him.

"Busted," Hikaru said. "I thought it sounded right, because I like to think that I'm creating a universe when I play. I would have gone with 'God of Go', but—" he started, a glint of humour in his eyes.

"It's too boastful?"

"Nope. Someone has taken it, too." Hikaru's light-hearted gaze turned serious again as his opponent--someone called 'Crazy Frog'--made his move. "Okay, Frog, you're asking for it!" he snarled, and placed a White stone on the left edge of the Go board.

Even Akira could see that Black's defenses were going to unravel in a matter of hands. Worse, 'Crazy Frog' seemed to have no idea of the mistakes he had made that would result in his defeat.

"Too easy," Hikaru said.

They exchanged more hands, before 'Crazy Frog' finally surrendered. Hikaru gave a loud sigh, and leant back, all his hostility gone. "I have to admit, I usually get more challenging opponents when I play as Sai," he said.

"I will play with you," Akira said. "Next time, when I see your name."

"Really?"

He sounded so surprised that Akira said, "Why not?" without thinking. *I always want to play with you*, he realized.

Hikaru turned to him. "I thought you wanted to play with Sai." There was a frown on his face, the furrow deep between his eyes, and his attention was focused on Akira, suddenly watchful of his every reaction.

"I do-" Akira stopped. That was not what he wanted to say. "Why wouldn't I want to play with my boyfriend?" he asked, hoping to turn the suddenly awkward moment around.

To his relief, Hikaru accepted that with a nod. He reached out and started to turn the laptop off. "I'll hold you to that," he said, trying to lighten his tone.

Akira nodded in promise, even as his thoughts ran on. He had always thought that to truly play Go, one had to be a professional. An amateur might love Go greatly, but he would never reach the level and dedication of a Go pro. An amateur would never make Go part of his life as thoroughly. But Hikaru broke the mold. He was not just a placeholder for Sai. Hikaru was as immersed in Go as one could be, from his involvement in the school Go Club, to his domination of Net Go, and even in the way he regarded Go to be an essential part of his life.

For the first time, Akira felt doubt about his presence in the Go world. He had wanted to climb the ranks as a professional Go player, and he had tried, as much as he dared, to bring Hikaru closer to his world. Hikaru, however, engaged the Go world on his own terms.

"Akira?"

He looked up to see Hikaru waving a hand in front of his eyes. "I've been calling you for the last few minutes. What are you thinking so hard about?" Hikaru asked.

Akira shook his head. "Nothing special," he said.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 8

Akira came back from a teaching appointment to see Hikaru resigning to his father.

"You've played a good game today, Shindou," his father said, his attention lifting from the Go board to look at Hikaru.

"Uh... thanks," Hikaru said, shifting to change from seiza to a cross-legged position, balancing himself on the tatami mat, his gaze never leaving the Go board. At all other times, Hikaru sprawled about on his seat, slouched and had even been known to put his feet on the table. But when he played with Akira's father, Hikaru always sat in the traditional way, his knees together and his feet neatly tucked beneath him, just like any proper pro from the Japanese Institute.

Quicker to notice Akira's entrance, his father glanced at him, and looked towards the vacant spot on his left. Akira accepted the unspoken invitation and sat down.

Hikaru belatedly noticed him, and blurted, "Akira, you're back!" He glanced from Akira to the Go board, and suddenly made a weak swipe at the empty air over it, as though he had thought to sweep the stones off it, and changed his mind at the last minute. "Uh, I didn't get your message that you would be late until I got here," he said. "Touya-sensei asked me to a game..." He motioned at it, as though embarrassed.

"Looks like an exciting game," Akira said, settling down, starting to analyze the stones.

"Er... hem. Yes," Hikaru said, incurably honest. "It was."

Looking at the game, Akira found it difficult to believe that Hikaru could imagine himself anywhere except as part of the Go world. Say,

for example, as a ramen chef. He had always known that Sai was on the level of his father, but seeing a game between them on an actual Go board, rather than on the computer screen, made the realization much more visceral.

The white stones were Hikaru's. His Go had the strength that Akira associated with Sai, and Sai's flexibility and slyness, but it also had the forethought, and the moments of spontaneous brilliance that Akira was beginning to associate with Hikaru himself. Privately, Akira suspected that Hikaru's Go style could in fact be very different from his mentor's, despite their surface similarities.

But Hikaru, he suspected, would balk at such a comparison.

"It was over here," Akira's father said, pointing to the upper left corner, which looked more like the remnants of an out-and-out fistfight, with white and black stones scattered in wild directions, a cluster or two sitting at the edge in what seemed like pure bewilderment.

Hikaru nodded decisively, his attention always at its strongest when it was turned on Go. "You made use of this to take my defences away, while taking advantage directly below."

"But you had planned for this from the start, didn't you? You wanted to use the territory here to strengthen the group here."

"Yeah. Unfortunately I hadn't counted on Black moving here," Hikaru said, pointing. "You're being experimental today, Sensei," he said.

"I can't rely on ordinary strategies when playing with Shindou," Akira's father said.

Listening to them, it suddenly occurred to Akira that his father had stopped addressing Hikaru as 'Shindou-kun' soon after he found out about Hikaru's online identity. Before that, he had even begun to use Hikaru's given name now and then, showing his acceptance of

Akira's relationship with Hikaru, but that had changed. Hikaru was now an equal; he was 'Shindou'.

Hikaru's voice had risen slightly, and he was bouncing in his seat. "Exactly!" he said, pointing first to the left edge of the board. "And if it hadn't been for your 'cut' here, I'd never have the opportunity to use the ko here."

"Which proved to be your undoing."

"Oh, yeah. Right," Hikaru said. "I should have realized that you would extend, instead of defending like you usually do." He glanced up, and met Akira's eyes. "Don't you think so, Akira?"

Akira murmured something indistinct. He had followed their comments without difficulty, but he found himself having to hide the surge of envy that rose as he studied the game. He had known of Hikaru's Go skill for a while--and suspected that he was Sai for much longer--for so long, yet it still came as a surprise, how superbly Hikaru played when he was serious.

"I still find it difficult sometimes to believe that Shindou plays Go so well," Akira's father said, echoing his thoughts, "but then I have to remind myself who his mentor was."

Hikaru ducked his head with embarrassed pride, making a demur, but his cheeks were pink. He never spoke much when Sai was mentioned, even indirectly, but he was inwardly pleased at the acknowledgement, Akira knew.

His father continued to associate Hikaru with Sai, but Akira knew that Hikaru was overdue for real recognition for his own Go. It was all very well that he was known to be a strong amateur player, that he had won the regional tournaments for high school players for the last three years. Hikaru deserved more, in every sense--more respect, more good opponents, more Go. He suddenly wanted to offer Hikaru the world. His envy evaporating, he smiled with real pride, at Hikaru. "Yes, it's a good game," he said.

"Are you sure I ought to be here?" Hikaru asked, looking around anxiously, hovering at the reception and not moving away from the tank of neon-coloured fish.

"You've been here before, surely," Akira said.

"Not really," Hikaru said, shuffling his feet. "I've been to the Go Study Institute a few times, but never here."

Akira belatedly remembered that the Go Study Institute held several community classes for amateur players--Hikaru had attended a few, when he first started learning the game. "Then you'll have a chance to look around."

Hikaru looked around again, as though expecting something dangerous. "There are *pros* here, Akira," he said, his voice slowing with audible trepidation on the word 'pro'.

"I'm a pro, too," Akira reminded him, not sure whether to feel amused or exasperated. "And anyway, you don't have to feel so nervous. Members of the public are also allowed in here, you know."

"Yeah, but-" he managed not to cling to Akira's sleeve as a door at the far end opened, and a group of insei flowed through, talking loudly among themselves.

"Fat chance of winning at the Wakashijisen..." one of them was saying.

"... and Kita-san still thinks he'll pass the Pro exam this year!" Another said.

"Not much chance of that, he's not that good..." his companion replied, before all five of them caught sight of Akira. "Touya-sensei!" he gasped.

"Good afternoon," Akira said politely, recognizing them as his students' insei friends.

There were a few hurriedly made bows. "G-good afternoon!" they said. Their gazes turned to Hikaru, who was pretending to be absorbed with the fish, and, if Akira knew him, hoping that he was invisible. Unable to deduce Hikaru's identity, the five of them nodded respectfully, and walked--rather quickly--in the direction of the cafeteria, trying to look as though they hadn't been gossiping about a fellow insei.

As soon as they were gone, Hikaru blew out a sigh of relief, and gave Akira a look of amazement. Before he could say anything, the same door opened, and this time, Fujimoto, Kaneda and Ohda entered, with another three insei behind them.

"Sensei," Fujimoto said. "And Shindou-san."

"Good afternoon," Ohda said.

Kaneda started glowering as soon as he saw Hikaru, but mumbled a short greeting after Ohda kicked him on the ankle.

Looking slightly more comfortable now that these were people he knew, Hikaru relaxed. " 'afternoon. What are y'all doing here?" he asked.

There was a small, frozen silence. "We're insei, Shindou-san," Fujimoto said politely. "Insei classes are held here during the week."

"Oh."

Kaneda looked as though he'd like to say more, but at that moment there was a 'ping' and the elevator door slid open. There was only one passenger: an old man with thinning white hair, dressed in a suit, who frowned at the occupants in the reception area.

A whisper of "Kuwabara-sensei" made the insei stand to one side immediately, their faces sober with respect.

Akira stiffened; it was Kuwabara's Honinbou title that he was currently fighting for, and he knew that despite his frail appearance, Kuwabara was one of the strongest players in the world.

Kuwabara exited the elevator and as though it was by accident, his eyes fell on Akira. "Are you Touya Kouyo's son?" he asked, obviously knowing the answer already. "Someone pointed you out to me once."

"Yes. I'm Touya Akira," Akira introduced himself. "Pleased to meet you," he said with a bow.

"Your father once said that you had joined the school Go club in junior high," Kuwabara said. "I thought it was a pity, that the son of Touya Kouyo should languish in a mere school club, instead of working hard as a pro."

"I was still working hard, in my own way, Sensei," Akira said. He could not help glancing at the reason he had joined a school club--Hikaru--but turned his gaze towards Kuwabara almost immediately.

"Now you're a pro. Will you be one of my challengers this year, Touya-kun?" Kuwabara asked.

Akira bowed. "That's precisely my intention," he said.

Kuwabara's eyebrows lifted for a second, but he gave a wheezing laugh, his wrinkles deepening. "Ambition is good for the young," he said, and went on his way, through the reception. The insei bowed, too, as he left. Before he had gone more than a few steps, however, he turned back.

Akira was alarmed when he realized that Kuwabara's attention seemed to be focused on Hikaru instead.

Hikaru, for this part, was neither bowing or trying to disappear behind the fish tank, but stood stiffly, staring at Kuwabara, frowning slightly.

"Kuwabara-sensei?"

The speaker sounded familiar, and Akira looked in the direction of the voice to see Isumi Shinichiro walking through the entrance.

Kuwabara had also turned his head towards Isumi. "Isumi-kun," he said.

"Good afternoon," Isumi said. "I didn't realize you would be here-" he paused and looked around the reception area. "Touya-san? And Shindou-san?"

"Good afternoon," Akira said. Beside him, Hikaru gave a hasty wave of greeting.

"Good afternoon, Touya-san, Shindou-san," Isumi said, before he turned to Kuwabara. "Kuwabara-sensei, I met your friends outside, they were waiting for you..."

Kuwabara nodded, and after giving Hikaru a last glance, he left the Go Institute.

The other insei seemed to take that as permission to move, even Fujimoto and his fellow students. With a nod of greeting to Akira, they made for the cafeteria.

Isumi approached him, his gentle smile becoming more genuine. "You don't have a game today, do you? Touya-san?"

Akira shook his head. "I wanted to show Hikaru some of the old Go books we have in the library," he said.

Isumi nodded. "Shindou-san likes to study the old games as well?" he asked.

There was no reply.

"Hikaru?" Akira turned towards Hikaru, to find him was still watching the direction where Kuwabara had walked.

"Shindou-san?" Isumi asked.

Hikaru raised an arm and pointed directly at the now-closed doors.
"Him." His voice was fierce, singular. "I want to play him."

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 9

------(9)-----

"Him?"

Akira couldn't blame Isumi for sounding incredulous. After all, Kuwabara had successfully defended his title for more than fifteen years, and grew trickier every year. Rumour had it that there were pros who would rather face a ravenous tiger than play a game with him. Yet, here was Hikaru saying that he wanted to play with Kuwabara.

"Yeah." Hikaru narrowed his eyes as he continued to stare after Kuwabara.

Isumi was staring directly at Hikaru, too, his eyes serious with thought, almost as though he were re-assessing his earlier opinion of him.

Akira could understand that. It took someone exceptionally foolhardy--especially a mere amateur--to want to play with someone like Kuwabara.

"I want to play with him," Hikaru repeated.

"But what made you-" Akira started to ask him why, but he had a sudden sense of foreboding as soon as the words were out of his mouth, and bit off the question.

"Because he insulted you!" Hikaru said, finally turning to him, his scowl deepening. "Did you hear what he said? He looked down on you! He laughed, and said 'ambition is good for the young!'" he pointed at the exit. "I'm going to teach that old geezer a lesson!"

Akira prided himself on not being easily intimidated, but he still glanced superstitiously in the direction of the exit at that, as though

expecting Kuwabara to appear and accept the challenge. "Hikaru, you-"

"But he's Kuwabara Honinbou, and you're-" Isumi did not finish the rest of the sentence, but the words 'an amateur' were understood. He continued to frown, looking as though he would like to reprimand Hikaru for his rudeness but not wanting to seem rude.

Hikaru stared at him. "What?" he asked, his voice suddenly thin.

"Kuwabara-sensei," Isumi said. "He's been in the Go world longer than anyone can remember, and-"

"No." Hikaru swallowed audibly, and his hand found Akira suddenly. "That other thing you said. About Honinbou."

Akira took in a sudden breath of comprehension.

Isumi continued to frown, but he said, "He's called Kuwabara Honinbou because he holds the Honinbou title."

"Title?" Hikaru looked as though he had heard something alien.

Familiar exasperation helped Akira to regain his composure. "I've told you before, a title is given to the top Go players. They are usually won after many games with other pros." Hikaru did not know much about titles in the pro world, and had no interest in learning, either. What little Akira told him usually slipped his mind within a few days.

"Oh." Hikaru was looking more like his usual self. "Then 'Honinbou'..."

Akira made an effort to soften his voice. "The Honinbou clan allowed the name to be used as a title many years ago, back when Japan was setting up the pro system."

"So there's no connection...?" Hikaru looked at Akira, mute appeal in his eyes.

"Connection?" Isumi was asking, but Akira ignored him and confirmed, "None." He squeezed Hikaru's hand, and released it. "Come on, let's go to the library. I promised to show you the old kifu, remember?" He nodded at Isumi, an abbreviated bow. "Goodbye, Isumi-san." He herded Hikaru towards the lifts, aware that Isumi was still staring at them.

"You've been staring at that kifu for a long time."

"Just preoccupied..." As though he were suddenly aware that he was too quiet, Hikaru asked, deliberately cheerful, "Are these all Shuusaku's kifu?"

"You know that better than me," Akira said, looking across the table full of kifu collections. "You've looked through those kept at the Shuusaku Museum, haven't you?"

"Yeah..." Hikaru looked around the tiny archive room, his eyes suddenly old with weight. "Shuusaku left about four hundred kifu. I haven't studied more than a fraction of them."

"There's time, Hikaru," Akira pointed out. "Go is for life."

Hikaru nodded. The kifu in front of him showed Shuusaku's famous Ear-Reddening Game. He had stared at it for a long time once he found it, and the expression on his face had been so wistful that Akira could not help making the remark about staring, to distract him.

"After that game," Hikaru started, his voice low, before he looked at Akira. "That one, with your father, before he retired. I mean," he shook his head a little, trying to get the words out, "the game that caused him to retire, I mean..." he looked at Akira.

Akira decided to take pity on him. "Sai's game with my father," he said.

"Yes. Um," Hikaru nodded vigorously, then grew sober again. "After that game, he said..." he swallowed, and glanced at Akira, before looking down at the kifu again. "After that game," he said again, his words slow and deliberate. "S-Sai said, he finally understood why he'd been allowed to remain in this world for so long. I-" he shook his head, and scrubbed his eyes fiercely. "He said, I was supposed to see that game. That's why he was with me, and I-I think, that's why-"

"Hikaru-" Akira said softly, stretching his hand towards him and finding the table between them. He stood up, but Hikaru was talking again.

"I think that's why he left!" Hikaru choked.

The tears were audible in his voice, though Akira could not see them, not from the way, Hikaru's face was turned away from him.

Akira started to go towards him, but Hikaru shook his head and said, "I'm fine," without looking up. "I mean, look at this game," he said, his voice growing stronger. "He was *brilliant*. With just one hand, he defended, attacked and consolidated his territory at the same time. I could never, ever play at that level."

Akira sat down in his chair again. "You feel as though you still can't measure up to him."

Hikaru rubbed his eyes, and looked at him. "I haven't learnt enough from him," he said. There was only a little redness at the corners of his eyes. "But at least..." he glanced down at the kifu. "At least, while he was around, I let him play as much Go as he liked." He nodded, once, almost to himself. "Even if it was on the internet, even if it was just NetGo," he said, before he met Akira's eyes. "To think that I had even considered not letting him play!" he smiled, inviting Akira to share the exaggerated horror.

"You let him play instead," Akira said. He remembered the tournament at Kaio, when all the brilliant hands of their game--the game between him and Sai, though he had not known of Sai then--

had been followed by one unexpected 11-8. Hikaru had admitted the other day that the 11-8 at that game was his own idea, and not Sai's. Hikaru had attempted to play for himself even then, Akira thought.

Hikaru's brow was wrinkled with thought. "Yeah. But that week, before he left, he said that I had to learn to play my own games. I still didn't realize, you know. That he was leaving." His right hand, clenched, came down heavily on the table with a loud thump. "I was so stupid. He wouldn't have said that unless he was leaving!"

Akira thought about it for a while, biting back the comforting platitudes that sprang to his lips. "He was your friend, but also your teacher," he said finally, going to stand beside Hikaru and taking the kifū from him gently, settling the fragile book back on the table. "He taught you so much about Go. He would have wanted you to play for yourself as well, don't you think?"

Hikaru's gaze followed the kifū. "So... I didn't miss a clue?" he asked. "I didn't miss that he was trying to say goodbye?"

How had he missed the fact that this was Hikaru's biggest regret? Akira nodded. "Wherever he is, he must be really happy that you're still playing Go," he said.

"I dream about him sometimes," Hikaru said suddenly, with the air of someone confessing to a sinful pleasure. "But in my dreams, he just stands there, and says nothing. Sometimes, he holds out his fan, and I think he must be saying something important, but I always wake up before I can figure out what he's saying."

"Fan?" The unexpected mention made Akira curious.

"Oh, yeah," Hikaru grinned briefly. "You wouldn't know. He's always carrying this traditional fan, and when I play with him, he'll use it as a pointer." He looked more relaxed. "My best memories are of him doing that."

"I'm glad," Akira said. Sai had brought sadness to Hikaru, but there were good memories too, he reminded himself.

Hikaru finally met his eyes. "Yeah, me too."

As soon as they stepped out of the Go Institute building, Hikaru growled, and turned away. "I don't want to talk to him," he said, taking Akira's hand and starting to walk away in the direction of the train station.

Wayu, who was clearly waiting outside for him, shot Akira a look of dislike. "Isumi said you were here, and I-"

"No!" Hikaru burst out. "Sorry, but I'm not in the mood for it, okay? And what's your problem? You're always glaring at Akira. Let's go, Akira."

Wayu shouted after them. "6-2!"

Hikaru said nothing and walked on, his long strides nearly pulling Akira off his feet.

"Hikaru-" Akira said. Hikaru had been uncharacteristically quiet after the afternoon in the kifu archive room, something that Akira had expected. The outburst at Wayu was unexpected, however.

"Ignore him," Hikaru said, his voice lowered. "6-2 is a stupid hand anyway. No point playing on."

There was something in his voice that seemed intrigued in spite of himself, so Akira asked, "Are you sure?"

Hikaru stopped so suddenly that Akira stumbled, and nearly crashed against him. "Hikaru?"

"All right, maybe it isn't such a bad hand," Hikaru conceded, thinking. "He didn't ignore the extension at the left." He nodded, and made an

about-turn, marching back the way he had come.

Akira followed, curious. Hikaru had refused to tell him the earlier hands, so it was difficult to imagine the actual game.

"9-9!" Hikaru was saying as he crossed his arms, facing Waya.

"8-2," Waya said after a brief pause, obviously surprised at Hikaru's return.

"13-1," Hikaru replied.

Waya said, "11-1," his voice growing more confident. Hikaru's eyebrows rose for a second, as though in appreciation. "Okay, then. 17-2."

"17-6."

"18-3."

"18-7."

"Huh." Hikaru subjected Waya to an appraising stare. "You're learning. 14-10."

Waya's frown deepened at that. "13-13. And what do you mean by that?"

"14-8. Nothing. Just thought you might like to know that you've improved," Hikaru said with a hint of his normal jocularity.

Waya's eyes narrowed at that. "12-14."

"11-12."

"15-12."

"8-5."

After a longer pause, Waya looked up. "That-" He seemed to be trying to control himself. "What kind of reply is that?" he demanded.

Hikaru had a comical look of surprise on his face at Waya's question. "What? But I-I-" he stammered.

"That's enough!" Waya stalked towards him. "Are you playing shidougo with me? Who do you think you are?" he asked. His face had turned red.

"What-" Hikaru took a step back, his eyes darting from him to Akira in a silent plea for rescue.

"I am a pro!" Waya screamed at him.

The scream made Hikaru back away once more, and not seeing the gravel path behind him, he fell down. Almost immediately, though, Hikaru stood up, his attention glued to Waya, alarmed but suddenly completely alert.

As though he were facing a madman,, Akira thought, deciding to step in. "And your behaviour shows it, I'm sure," he said. It was his turn to grab Hikaru's hand this time. "Let's go, Hikaru. Ignore him." He walked Hikaru all the way to the train station, ignoring Waya's shout of protest.

Hikaru remained silent, and it was only on the way back to Akira's home from the train station that he spoke. "This proves it, Akira," he said, shaking his head as though to dismiss the shock physically.

"Proves what?"

"That pros are crazy!" Hikaru said. "I wasn't playing shidougo with him! I just saw it all of a sudden, you know."

"Saw what?"

"That instead of a step-by-step invasion, I could use the 8-5 position to take away his territory from the inside. Much faster."

"He didn't see it."

Hikaru huffed. "Well, even if he didn't see it, there's no need to say that I was playing shidougo when I wasn't! It's so unfair. If I were playing shidougo with him, I'd have said so. He didn't have to shout at me that he was a pro," he grumbled.

"Waya-san is very conscious of being a pro," Akira said.

"Well, I think it's eating his brain," Hikaru whined. "I mean, does turning pro make people think that they are extra smart, or something?"

"I can't speak for Waya-san," Akira said. "But turning pro only makes me more aware that there are so many more good players out there." Like all the other opponents he had to defeat to get a title. Not to mention the existence of someone like Hikaru.

"Exactly!" Hikaru said. "Being a pro means nothing!" he declared. He caught Akira's expression, and his jaw dropped a little. "Ahaha, present company excepted, of course," he amended with a sheepish grin.

Something was not right. "Of course," Akira said, wondering why his voice was so tentative, as though he was dreading something...

"You couldn't catch me becoming a pro, not for all the prize money in the world!" Hikaru declared.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 10

Akira told himself to remain calm. "That wasn't what you said the last time," he said, trying to make his voice light-hearted and unconcerned.

"Last time?" Hikaru scrunched his face up in thought. "When?"

"When I caught you by the station, after you had gone to that Children's event the first time," Akira said. He could still remember the frantic rush to the train station, pushing himself into a crowded train, and all that running, to get to that mysterious opponent who had defeated him without any prior experience in playing Go.

"When you caught-" Hikaru echoed, before he blinked in sudden comprehension. "Akira, that was years ago!" he protested. "I'm not that mercenary now, right?"

"I guess not," Akira said. Hikaru had a monthly allowance from his parents, and was constantly campaigning for increases from them. He had talked about getting a part-time job now and then, but the truth was, he played too much Go for that.

"Besides, you gave me *such* a scolding when I said I wanted to turn pro and win a title," Hikaru said, evidently recalling this part at last and giving him an exaggeratedly wounded look. "It really hurt me, right here," he said, thumping himself with a flattened palm.

Akira shook his head, and pulled Hikaru's palm two inches across his chest. "That's your right lung," he said, wondering why he had to keep correcting Hikaru about human anatomy. Really, who was the one who quit school at fifteen? Then he realized he was getting distracted, and that they had drifted away from the topic. "So the prize money doesn't attract you now?" he asked, and inwardly

squirmed, wishing he could take the words back as soon as he said them. He had actually stooped to using money as a lure. For Go.

Luckily, Hikaru thought he was joking. "Very funny," he said. "Anyway, all I have to do is to wait for you to make it big, and I'll just live off you. Good plan, huh?"

"Very funny," he said, fighting to sound like his usual self.

They reached his home, and Hikaru, after a number of furtive looks around to be sure that no other pro was around--"pros are scary people, Akira!"--finally sat down in Akira's room and laid his head on the table with an exaggerated moan. Akira looked at him for a moment, and made his way to the kitchen.

It was quiet, with his father resting in his room, and his mother was in the kitchen. She greeted him cheerfully, but her smile dropped a little when he said that Hikaru was in his room. Unlike his father, his mother had not taken the news that he was dating Hikaru well. Though she liked Hikaru, Akira could tell she preferred not to think of her son dating another male.

She usually said nothing, however, because Akira's father seemed to be utterly nonchalant, even accepting, of Akira's relationship with Hikaru. But then it was known that his father, Touya Kouyo, one of the most famous Go players in Japan, valued Go-playing ability above everything else.

"Ask Shindou-san if he'd like to stay for dinner," she said. "I'm making curry rice."

She was trying, though.

Even if he could tell that she still hoped that it was a phase he was going through, dating Hikaru, Akira was still glad of the welcome. "I'll ask him," he said.

She smiled another polite smile; Akira forced down his discomfort and returned it, before turning towards the refrigerator.

"I'm so tired," Hikaru said, when Akira came back with a chilled can of green tea, for him. "Thanks," he opened the can and drank noisily.

Akira busied himself straightening the perfectly straight books on his shelves. "Do you want to stay for dinner?" he asked. "Mother has already cooked." Hikaru had no idea of his mother's real sentiments, and he hoped it stayed that way.

Hikaru glanced up, putting down the empty can. "Sure," he agreed, before he frowned. "Wait, your father is at home, right?"

Akira nodded.

Hikaru grimaced. "If Touya-sensei sees me, he'll want to ask me to play."

"You don't want to?"

"I don't mean to be rude, Akira, but I really don't feel like playing any more Go today." He looked at Akira, his lower lip protruding slightly, like a six-year-old waiting for an adult to supply all the answers.

Akira sat down beside him, and did not hide his sigh of exasperation. Here he was worrying about his mother, and Hikaru was worrying about nothing. "You can tell him no, Hikaru," he said.

"But..." Hikaru put the empty can on the table, though his fingers remained curled around it, squeezing it slightly to make a dent. "I don't want to make Touya-sensei angry."

Shaking his head, Akira tried to control his frustration. It had been a long day: first that scene with Kuwabara, then Hikaru's misery at missing Sai, and the scene with Waya. "You won't make him angry," he said. "You have the right to decide if you want to play, Hikaru."

"But if Touya-sensei wants to play-"

"He'll understand." Hikaru's intransigence about playing Go required more and more patience to deal with as time went on. Akira had wanted to play Go since he was young, first modeling himself after his father, and later chasing a twelve-year-old Hikaru. He later turned pro so he could play more Go. It was as simple as that. But Hikaru was different. He took a deep breath, to stop himself from shouting. "Father won't mind," he said.

Hikaru shook his head, stubborn. "I *have* to," he said. "S-Sa... he would be disappoint-"

"You can't keep playing for a dead man!"

There was a loud crunch, and he watched as the empty can crumpled in Hikaru's hand.

Akira could hear a loud ringing in his ears all of a sudden, and he realized it was because the room had gone utterly quiet. His words returned to his memory and he stuttered, "Hikaru, I-I-"

"Is that what you think?" Hikaru asked, sounding unlike himself. His voice was low, determined and furious. The voice of an adult.

It was a voice Akira had never heard from him.

"I asked you a question," Hikaru said, the words too measured to be coming from him. "Is that what you think?" he repeated.

Akira held his breath. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Then what way did you mean?" Hikaru demanded, standing up. The crushed drink can fell over with a clatter on the table, spilling a few drops of green tea onto the table.

Akira looked away, his gaze turning to his lap, at his hands placed there.

"I'm asking you something!" Hikaru shouted. There was a ragged tone in his voice--anger held back by nothing more than a

threadbare blanket--yet thick with something that felt like anguish.

Akira studied the way his knuckles were whitened by the way he clenched his fists. "It's true, isn't it?" he said, barely recognizing his own voice. "You've been playing for Sai, all this time. Never for yourself."

"That's not--"

Akira spoke faster, drowning out the denial. "All the other things you do," he said, "the school Go club, playing in amateur Go tournaments--they're just props for you to be Sai, so that other people would not ask about your Go. Because you're playing your own Go, but only as a leftover of Sai's Go. You've never cared for your Go as much as you did Sai's."

"That's not--" Hikaru repeated. He stopped, and silence descended again, motionless in the neat little room.

As though he were waiting for him to continue, Akira thought. Hikaru wants to know more, he told himself. I mustn't disappoint him.

"You're so scared of pros because you know that they're playing for themselves. They are selfish in a way that you won't let yourself be," he said. "They have ambition and they hunger for recognition, for their Go, for better Go." He thought of Waya, shouting after them, of Kuwabara persisting in the Go world for so many years, and of the way his own students worked towards their pro dreams.

"They are striving the only way they know," he continued, not looking at Hikaru. "So, I ask you this, Shindou," he said, unconsciously reverting to the way he had called Hikaru before they started dating, "the same thing I asked you that day, in front of the train station: Have you ever been serious about something in your life?"

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 11

For a moment all Akira could hear was silence, then the rapid thump of footfalls on the tatami as Hikaru ran at him, and an instinct he had not known he possessed made him step to the side, just in time, so that the flying punch only glanced his cheek. He sat down suddenly on the floor as Hikaru's body brushed against his.

There was a loud crash. He turned, and saw that the momentum of the rush had made Hikaru collide with the wall. Even as he watched, Hikaru picked himself up, and turned around, facing him.

"Hikaru-"

"Shut up!" Hikaru shouted, his face reddened, the veins in his throat standing out.

Akira stood up, using the nearby chair for support--it was strange that his feet seemed to be so weak--but he had to get through to Hikaru.

Before he could say or do anything else, Hikaru was already standing before him. His eyes were red, but the expression on his face never wavered. He pulled the chair from Akira's hands, and gripped the front of his shirt. "Take it back," he said.

"Stop-" He tried to pull himself loose, but found that he couldn't move. He stared, torn by the pain in Hikaru's eyes.

"Take it back," Hikaru said again. "What you said just now."

"Hikaru-"

"Or we end it now."

Denial sprang to his lips, but the wetness in Hikaru's eyes stopped him from retracting his words. Those tears were not for him. "No. I won't," he said, hardly able to believe what he was saying. "I won't take it back. You've been playing for Sai all along, never for yourself. Admit it to yourself, even if you won't admit it to anyone else."

Hikaru's eyes widened, but it did not stop tears from rolling down his face. "What do you know!" he said. "He was my teacher, my mentor, my best friend-"

"And he's gone," Akira said, cringing at the way his words sounded so final.

Abruptly Hikaru released him, pushing him to the side, his shoulders heaving as though he had run for miles. "I have to go," he said in a softer voice. A child's voice.

Akira extended a hand towards him. "Hikaru-"

Hikaru retreated immediately. "I have to go," he said again. "G-goodbye, Touya."

Akira heard the door open, and Hikaru was gone.

Akira barely stopped himself from making an exclamation. The game was still in progress. But he could not help glancing up again.

For three days Hikaru had not been available, Akira thought, remembering all the phone calls he had made, and now he chooses to turn up here, of all places? Akira had been prevented by his schedule from paying a personal visit to Hikaru's school--or perhaps his home--to find him, and now nothing surprised him more than seeing Hikaru, still in his school uniform, sitting down quietly in the the observers' corner.

Hikaru was not looking at Akira; his attention was solely on the Go board. Akira tried to take in the fact that here was Shindou Hikaru,

voluntarily appearing at the Go Institute, sitting next to a couple of high-ranking pros who were also observing the game. He fought against the surge of hope that perhaps Hikaru understood, after all. Looking away, and telling himself to concentrate, Akira continued playing Go. Nonetheless, a part of him became shivery with nervousness despite himself, so that his opponent, Kurata, gave him an odd look, despite the perilous states of both their territories.

Akira reminded himself not to be distracted.

Kurata Atsushi, the newest Juudan, was a brilliant player who was well known for his superb intuition to achieve his victories, and he had just forced Akira into an impasse. Akira was on the verge of conceding his territories in the centre, but Kurata's attacks were yet too entangled with his own weak spots to disengage easily. There seemed no step that would not lead to a long, drawn-out, and possibly disastrous war for both sides. Akira forced down his excitement at seeing Hikaru, and pushed himself to focus his mind and consider the game, just as he had been taught.

It was hard to concentrate, however. His mind kept dwelling on the ties between him and Hikaru. Akira had chased the mysterious Shindou Hikaru, aged twelve, because he played a style of Go that was old, expert, and most disconcerting of all, had defeated him. But Hikaru disappointed him in the junior high tournament, and Akira thought that it all ended there.

Then he had faced a mysterious 'Sai' on the internet, and returned to the mystery of Shindou Hikaru once more. He abandoned the mystery of Sai so he could take up the friendship of Shindou Hikaru. Yet it turned out that Sai had always been ever-present within Hikaru.

Sai and Hikaru. Hikaru and Sai. They should have been separate, but to Hikaru they were inseparable. Impasse. Akira let his thoughts, troubled as they were, return to the game. All thought of Hikaru flowed away as he reconsidered the threat. Yes. There was a way to unknit the disputed territories, to release himself from the trap in the

making. He only had to stop looking from the outside. He suddenly wondered, as he reached into the go-ke for a stone, if anyone else in the room would see it too.

Kurata did not react at first when Akira placed the stone, though he leant back a fraction moments later, as though to gain a wider vantage point. He placed another stone after long consideration, diagonal to Akira's hand. Akira responded, a challenge this time, not only to Kurata but almost as though he were playing with Hikaru, to show him what his intentions were. Kurata glanced up at him, but did not say anything, and replied.

The softest of murmurs reached his ears, but he did not hesitate, and played on.

It seemed to take no time at all.

"That was the decisive hand!" Ichiryu was exclaiming when Akira left the playing room, after the post-game discussion with an indignant Kurata, who had already gone downstairs. He caught sight of Akira. "Touya-san, I was referring to your hand at that point, when you and Black were stuck in the centre. It didn't make sense to me at first, but it turned the game around within twenty hands. Well-played!"

"Thank you," Akira said, wondering how soon he could disengage himself. Hikaru had disappeared soon after Kurata resigned, and Akira wondered if he had only come to see the game. No, Hikaru had always made excuses not to come to the Go Institute, even to see Akira play--it could not be that he would leave just like that, now.

"Good game, Touya-san," Serizawa said, approaching him. "Now you're a step closer to becoming the final challenger for the Honinbou title."

Akira bowed his head modestly. "Thank you. But I have to play with Ogata-san next," he said. "That will not be easy."

"He's also your father's student, isn't he?" Serizawa asked.

"Yes," Akira said, not caring about that at the moment. "I'm sorry, I have to go now."

"Oh, you must be looking for your friend," Serizawa said.

Ichiryu interrupted, "That high school student who came right in the middle of the game? He's a friend of Touya-san?"

Akira nodded. "Yes. Have you seen him?"

Serizawa frowned. "He must be an outsider. I don't remember seeing him around before."

"He went downstairs," Ichiryu said cheerfully. "Maybe he didn't want to interrupt your post-game discussion. But it's easy to see that he's not a pro. Fancy arriving halfway through the game!"

"Thank you," Akira said, ignoring the rest of Ichiryu's words as his nervousness returned. What was he going to say to Hikaru, he wondered, but knew he had to go and talk to him, just the same. "Please excuse me," he said to Ichiryu and Serizawa, and walked past them, smiling politely at the game officials.

He took the stairs, suddenly worried that Hikaru had left after all. Not seeing him at the lobby, his dismay grew. But he need not have worried. Barely had he entered the reception area when he heard the sound of loud squabbling.

"That was *not* an illogical hand!" came Hikaru's outraged voice.

An unexpected voice answered him. "I say it was, and I was playing him. All signs pointed to the need for an offensive, but he played a defensive hand instead."

Kurata? Akira thought to himself. He walked forward to see Hikaru and Kurata standing over a Go board, both with crossed arms as they looked down at the game on it.

"That's because you didn't see the potential for attack over here!" Hikaru nodded--rather vaguely, Akira thought--at the Go board. "See, your defense is weak here. And it's true, see, you got flattened..."

"But only because I conceded that group--"

"Hah! He saw through your tactic to trap him..."

"How do you know?"

"Because I always see where that person is seeing," Hikaru said, catching sight of him, and his expression becoming frozen. "Oh."

Akira swallowed. Due to his busy schedule as a pro, there were always stretches of days when Akira went without seeing his boyfriend, but never had there been this disconnect between them. Now, he found that he did not know how to reach out to Hikaru, even without his surprising familiarity towards Kurata.

Kurata had turned to face Akira, before looking back at Hikaru. "You two know each other?" he asked.

Hikaru's face looked bland, his previous exuberance vanishing like smoke. "Yes, we do," he answered. "Hello, Touya."

Touya. Hikaru had not called him that for years, even before they started dating. Akira found that he did not know how to answer. "Hello," he finally said.

"You know," Kurata sounded curious. "I always thought you only hung around amateur players, Shindou-kun. Other than me, of course."

"Touya and I met at his father's Go salon," Hikaru said. "Isn't that right, Touya?" he asked, deliberately casual. He met Akira's gaze without reaction.

"Touya Meijin's Go salon? So you've played with Touya Kouyo then?" Kurata asked.

"A few times," Hikaru said, his eyes never leaving Akira's. "I actually played with Touya first. Do you still remember that game, Touya? It was a slaughter."

By Sai.

The words went unspoken. Kurata, oblivious, started to laugh. "I can just imagine it!" he said. "Shindou-kun, you're a decent player but Touya-kun here was born to be a pro."

He had no idea of Hikaru's true strength, Akira realized.

"Oh, I knew that," Hikaru said. "He's been training for it since he was two. Right, Touya?"

"Yes, it's always been my goal to play professional Go," Akira braced himself. "Something that Shindou-san doesn't understand."

Hikaru glared.

Kurata laughed. "I bet he thinks it's boring, huh, Shindou-kun? Still a hobby only? Not taking it seriously?"

He thought he sensed Hikaru wince, and a vengeful part of him was satisfied.

"Oh, I'm searching for the Hand of God, just like everyone else," Hikaru said, his words sounding awkward despite himself.

"A lofty goal," Kurata said, not bothering to conceal his broad grin. "Too lofty for an amateur, perhaps?"

He meant only to tease, Akira could tell, but he could see Hikaru's jaw tighten. "How did you come to know Shindou-san, Kurata-san?" he asked quickly. He didn't even stumble over 'Shindou' this time.

"Oh, that." Kurata frowned in memory. "We met at a Go event. Shindou-kun is an authority on Shuusaku's artifacts, do you know that?" he said. "We first met when he spotted someone trying to sell

a Go board supposedly belonging to Shuusaku. Took one look and said it was a fake. Kicked up a big fuss, and got attention just because he won the amateur tournament that time."

Hikaru scowled. "Nobody is allowed to insult Shuusaku when I'm around!" he declared.

Kurata studied him for a moment. "You are a weird kid, you know that? Maybe I should count my lucky stars that you're an amateur," he said.

"Huh?" Hikaru said, the change of topic taking him by surprise.

"It's late," Kurata said. "I should be getting back. Shindou-kun, it was a surprise to see you. Touya, I'll be sure to avenge my loss at our next game. Goodbye," he said.

"Goodbye, Kurata-san," Akira said, nodding his head in a bow, watching as Kurata's large figure disappeared through the doors at the far end.

"What did he mean, he should thank his lucky stars?" Hikaru asked beside him.

"He means that..." Akira paused, and continued in a quieter voice. "He means that you could be a pro, Shindou."

Instead of the expected denial at this suggestion, Hikaru's lips only tightened. "If I were a pro, I would be your opponent," he said.

"That's highly possible," Akira said, but he was suddenly struck by the thought that no, Hikaru would not merely be his opponent.

"It means we would be rivals," Hikaru said, turning fully so that he was facing Akira directly. "Touya Akira vs. Shindou Hikaru."

Judging by his skills, Hikaru could even pass him. He knew how good Hikaru was. "That's possible, too," Akira said, the words slipping out through suddenly dry lips. He was making a huge

mistake. Hikaru was better than him. Hikaru played like Sai! If Hikaru was a pro, Akira would be left far, far behind. He fought against the sudden panicky urge to tell Hikaru to forget it.

"Oh." Hikaru was quiet for a few seconds, before he spoke again.
"Then this is war."

Too late.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 12

Akira found his thoughts in disarray. Hikaru as a pro, and his rival. Akira felt lightheaded at the feeling of rightness: this was what Hikaru was supposed to be. Nonetheless, he asked, "Why?" If years of association with professional Go, not to mention Akira himself, had not made Hikaru consider taking the pro exam, what had made him change his mind?

"Your game," Hikaru said.

"My game?" Akira made it a question. After all, Hikaru had seen his games before. "What do you mean?" Akira asked, but his gaze turned to the Go board in spite of himself, where his game with Kurata had been re-created.

Hikaru's hand reached towards the Go board, as though to touch the stones of the game, but only curved his fingers around a go-ke, tilting it one way, then the other, so that the white glass stones inside clinked with sharp sounds. Kurata had played as White. "I thought about what you said," Hikaru said, his voice softer now. "About me, playing for a dead man. Caring more about Sai's Go rather than my own."

"Hikaru, I was-"

"Playing for Sai, rather than for myself," Hikaru went on. He was facing the Go board, but his eyes were unfocused. He seemed to have forgotten that they were in public. His fingers left the go-ke and he held up a white Go stone between thumb and forefinger.

A memory came to Akira then, of Hikaru holding stones like that, the first two times he had played with Akira. The behaviour of a beginner and the skill of a master.

"Sometimes, I feel as though a 19 by 19 territory is too small for me." For a moment, the stone almost seemed to glow between Hikaru's tanned fingers.

Akira stood still, frozen by the radiance.

"But then I saw your game with Kurata. I saw the exact moment when you read the exact way out of that impasse. I could feel the intensity between you and Kurata, and I realized: it's the same kind of intensity that produces great games." He finally looked up, the Go stone still firmly held between his fingers.

Akira was shocked to find himself taking a half-step backwards.

Hikaru didn't seem to notice, but continued talking. "I'm starting to realize that if I really want to reach the Hand of God, I have to play for myself. I have to make sure that you see only me, Shindou Hikaru." With that, he placed the stone on the Go board.

Akira stared down at the Go board, seeing the way Hikaru's white stone had devastated all of Black's defenses in a single hand. Hikaru had read even further than either of them. "Hikaru, you-" he began, and saw Hikaru push the go-ke to one side.

"I want to play a game like that," Hikaru said to him.

Akira's breath caught in his throat, staring at him. *What about Sai*, Akira wanted to ask, but stopped himself when Hikaru took a step forward, and stood right in front of him.

"And I want to play like that with you," Hikaru said, so close that Akira could feel the heat from his body.

Uppermost in Akira's mind was the impulse to grab Hikaru and kiss him--to find an empty classroom and do more--and it was a long time before he finally said, "So do I."

"Why did you come today, Hikaru?" Akira asked, when they were seated in a corner of the nearby fast food restaurant. There was so much more he wanted to say to Hikaru--but he didn't know where to start.

"What, you don't think it was to watch you play with Kurata-san?" Hikaru teased. He seemed to have regained his good humour, but Akira could see in the little gestures--that Hikaru had chosen to come to this very public place, and seated himself directly opposite him--that Hikaru was still hesitant because of the words they had exchanged the last time.

"You were late," Akira said, falling into his usual serious stance. "I bet that when you got to the Go Institute, you had no idea that I was playing an official game."

Hikaru looked abashed. "I didn't distract you, did I?" he asked.

Akira couldn't help a sniff at that notion. He, let Shindou Hikaru distract him from an official game? "No," he said, and asked, "What was it you came to see me about?"

Instead of answering, Hikaru bent down towards his school bag on the floor. There was a rustling that sounded like paper, and Hikaru straightened again to face him, holding out something to him. It was a sheaf of papers, dog-eared and smudged. It looked familiar. "I came today because I wanted to show you these."

"Those are-" Akira glanced up at Hikaru for confirmation. "The kifu you showed me the last time?"

"Not just those," Hikaru said. "I received more, later on. Take a look at the rest."

Curious, Akira took them, noticing at once that it was indeed a thicker pile. He thumbed slowly through them, noting that like the previously seen kifu, they were all computer-printed, without name or identifying marks. There was one of his, which caught his attention--

it took a while to remember--one of the first games he played as a pro. The rest were mostly games played by Sai, he realized, but not all. "When did you get all these?" he asked, turning to the adjacent table to spread the kifu out..

"In the past two weeks. They were in my shoe locker. I still haven't figure out who is sending them," Hikaru said, a hint of his usual puzzlement entering his voice, "and at first I kept wondering what the messages in them were."

"I don't think they are messages." Akira had thought that with the first six kifu Hikaru showed them then, and now he was sure. He wondered why Hikaru had not shown them to him before. The other kifu--fifteen in all--varied in playing styles and all stopped in various stages of chuban and yose. All were by advanced players, Akira judged with an experienced eye: almost certainly pros, all of them, by the level of the games.

"I think there is," Hikaru said, "but I still haven't figured it." He chuckled, without humour. "But you're right, I don't think it's messages such as 'corner under threat' or 'ko fight leads to mutual loss'."

Akira studied the kifu again, remembering what Hikaru had also noticed the last time. "You said that in all the games, Black is threatened by White."

"Yeah," Hikaru's frown was reserved for the kifu now. "And it's the same with these. I got to thinking," he said, "after that last batch. I thought it was strange that whoever sent the kifu would go to the trouble of sending me one of Touya-sensei's old games, from the time before his retirement. I mean, there were no computerized records at the time, so he had to create a soft copy from other sources... erm, I don't know how--"

Hikaru's uncertainty was achingly familiar. "Probably from old copies of *Go Weekly*," Akira said, longing to smile at him but did not dare. Hikaru had always tried to ignore the existence of that publication,

saying that it was marketed only towards pros. It didn't stop him from poring over the kifu that Akira had collected from it over the years, though.

"Oh," Hikaru said. "Anyway, it still means that the sender had to find the copy, and scan the kifu, or something. Seemed like a lot of trouble, when you can easily find Touya-sensei's games online now."

"So?" Akira asked, more sharply than he intended. His father had retired soon after that game with Sai. Many people thought it was his health, but the fact was, he played far better Go now. It was Sai--and it was Hikaru--who had caused that. It came to his mind then, the way Hikaru had pointed out Sai's mistake in that game later, a hand that even Akira's father had not seen.

Hikaru's brilliance was there, he realized belatedly, if one thought to search for it.

"You know, Touya-sensei does play much better Go after he retired," Hikaru said, inadvertently echoing Akira's train of thought. "If the sender had wanted to impress me with high-level games, Touya-sensei's recent games would have been much better. More challenging."

"But the sender chose to send you my father's kifu from the time he was a pro."

"Yeah," Hikaru looked down at the kifu. "I wouldn't have thought much of it, but then I got this one yesterday." He jabbed a finger at a kifu. "This was one of your games, wasn't it?"

Akira saw that he was pointing to the kifu that had caught his attention a moment ago. "Yes."

Hikaru frowned. "I had to be sure," he said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Akira said.

"I remember your games," Hikaru said. "But I don't remember you showing me this one. It's only because I know your Go that I knew it was yours, even though it's so old."

"It was a game with-" Akira paused for thought. It was a long time ago. Turning pro had been a dizzying experience, and methodical as always, he had recorded that game in his personal record. "Katagi 2-dan, at that time. You're right, I never showed you this game," he said. Hikaru was still learning Go at his school Go club then, and it had been years by the time they felt comfortable enough to talk about Go again. By then, he had so many other games to show Hikaru.

"I thought so," Hikaru said.

The events of the past came back slowly to Akira. "In fact, I don't think I ever showed anyone else this game," he said. "It was one of first ones I played when I turned pro, but I didn't play as well as I hoped, so I always showed you other games-" He stopped and stared at Hikaru. "How did the sender get hold of this game?"

Hikaru raised both hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I thought you might know."

Akira shook his head, and was about to speak when someone called "Touya-san!" Akira looked up, suddenly aware of Hikaru starting to retreat, and saw a group of young pros coming towards them, staring at them curiously. "Saeki-san," he said, greeting the person who had called out to him.

Beside him, Hikaru squeaked, " *Waya* ?" He stood up as though to run, and a few pieces of kifu floated to the floor. No doubt he had recalled Waya's show of temper from the last time.

Akira placed his hand on Hikaru's arm. "Hikaru, sit down," he said. "It's all right."

"This is your friend?" Saeki asked, and looked at Hikaru, who had retreated to Akira's side, still holding his kifu. Waya was standing beside him, frowning at Hikaru.

"This is Shindou Hikaru," Akira said. "He's a friend-"

"Your boyfriend," Waya stated, his gaze never leaving Hikaru. "You should introduce him to us."

Akira glanced at Hikaru without comment. Inwardly, his uncertainty grew--what if Hikaru denied it? After all, the fight about Sai was still a rift between them. "Y-yes," he said. "He's my boyfriend." He swallowed, half-wishing Hikaru would stop holding up the kifu in front of him like a shield. "Hikaru, you know Waya-san. This is Saeki Kouji, 4-dan. He and Waya-san have the same teacher, Morishita-sensei 9-dan?" He had shown Hikaru a lot of kifu of Morishita's games in the past.

Hikaru nodded. "Morishita..." he murmured almost to himself, distracted. "'Tanker'!" he exclaimed.

"Excuse me?" Waya asked.

Hikaru flushed. "Er... nothing."

Hoping that Hikaru was not about to blurt out anything else, Akira dug an elbow into Hikaru's side--so familiar, this action--and continued his introduction. "These are Kadowaki Tatsuhiko, and Honda Toshinori," he nodded to them politely. "And this is Nase Asumi."

"Pleased to meet you all," Hikaru said, sounding only a little apprehensive. He nudged Akira. "Akira, they are all pros!" he said in a voice that was meant to be a whisper, but wasn't.

It was second nature to Hikaru by now, Akira reflected, to always be hypersensitive about pros. "And this is Yashirou Kiyoharu," he said hurriedly. "You remember, he was on the same team with me for the

Hokuto Cup games. Hello, Yashirou. I didn't know you'd be in Tokyo today."

"I have a game tomorrow. You had a game today, Touya?"

"Yes," Akira said, "with Kurata-san. Remember when I told you that I was seeing someone? It's Hikaru."

Hikaru glanced at Akira uncertainly, as though for guidance.

"Pleased to meet you," he said to Yashirou.

"Pleased to meet you," Yashirou said. "I remember Akira saying that you play a whole lot of Netgo, right?" He nodded at the sheets of kifu. "Are these your games?"

Kadowaki spoke at that point. "Oh, you've brought them to show Touya-san? So Touya-san tutors you in Go?" he asked.

"No, I-" Hikaru looked as though he would have loved to take back that 'No' when Yashirou's look of interest grew. "Er, they're just games that I saw on NetGo, and I wanted to discuss them with Akira. I'm making a mess, I-" he started to straighten the kifu in his arms, accepting the ones Akira gave him and tried to look busy.

"This is a game between Sai and a Korean pro," Waya said, standing up from where he had just picked up another kifu, and showing it to the other pros. "I think his NetGo name is 'Prince of Baduk'."

"How do you know that?" Nase asked, frowning at it.

"I watched this game only last week," Waya said. "The other guy lost by two-and-a-half moku, and afterwards he challenged Sai to another one, only to be ignored."

Akira was the only one close enough to hear Hikaru mutter, "Stupid Ko Yong-ha." He managed to stifle the urge to laugh, both at Yong-ha's NetGo name and at Hikaru's disgruntled reaction. Hikaru had

been nursing a grudge against Ko Yong-ha ever since he heard about the latter's comments about Shuusaku's status in Japan.

"Wow, Sai went right over him," Kadowaki said admiringly, turning his head to one side so he could see the kifu too. "Look at the way he turned this corner around!"

"Well, some people say Sai is a pro," Nase said, "so that isn't so surprising."

"Even pros have off days, but Sai doesn't," Waya said. "He's been unbeatable so far, and he's been online for more than six years! He even beat Touya, remember?" He gave Touya a pointed look.

Why had he never guessed that Waya was a fan of Sai? Touya thought, ignoring Waya.

"He can't be an amateur, though, he's too good. I think he's a pro," Yashirou offered.

Saeki shrugged. "I know Morishita-sensei's played with him a few times. Pro or not, he's good."

"I think he's a pro, too," Honda said.

Hikaru was watching them discuss the kifu, his eyes darting from one to the other as though he was at a tennis match. "Wait a minute. P-people think S-Sai is a pro?" he asked.

"Well, yes," Nase said after a moment. She glanced at her fellow pros before meeting Hikaru's eyes. "He's been playing at such a high level ever since he appeared, and plenty of pros make it a point to play with him or follow his games. Not just the Japanese pros, but also those from Korea, China and other countries. Most people just assume that he's a pro who is hiding his identity for some reason."

"I mean, it's obvious, isn't it?" Waya said. He sounded almost annoyed that Hikaru had dared to question this. "Everyone is

following Sai."

Saeki protested. "Waya, you're over-generalizing-"

Waya ploughed on. "Sai is probably one of the most famous players in recent years. You know, I can't imagine what will happen if Sai's real identity is revealed one day. Or maybe I can," he said, looking steadily at Hikaru.

Hikaru swallowed. "W-what will happen?" His fingers tightened on the kifu he had collected.

"Dozens... no, hundreds of players will be clamoring to play with him. They'd want to know where he comes from and how he learnt to play so well. And especially the high-dan players, they'd want to know everything about him."

"Oh, shit," Hikaru muttered.

"What?" Saeki asked. Waya echoed him, his eyes studying Hikaru all the while.

Hikaru turned away. "Oh, shit," he repeated. He slumped down, staring sightlessly into nothing.

"Hikaru!" Akira said, turning to him and shaking him gently on the shoulder, to no avail. He glared at Waya, and at the other pros. Hikaru suddenly turned with a muttered "Akira" and clung to him with both hands.

As though suddenly aware that they had intruded on something private, the other pros made their excuses and quickly left, with Saeki making Waya return the kifu he had taken and physically dragging him away.

Yashirou lingered behind. "Is he all right?" he asked Akira in an undertone. "Your boyfriend is a bit-" He was too polite to complete the sentence, but made a vague gesture.

Akira swallowed. "He'll be all right," he said. At least, he hoped so. "I just need to take him out for some air," he said.

"Ah. Need any help?"

"I can manage. Thanks," Akira said, privately reflecting that he got on much better with Yashirou than the other young Tokyo pros.

"Okay. See you, Touya."

After Yashirou had finally left, Akira turned his attention to Hikaru. "Hikaru?" he said softly.

No reply.

"Hikaru, let's get out of here," Akira said. Despite Hikaru's clenched fists on his shirt, Akira managed to collect all the kifu. He stuffed them into Hikaru's bag. "Come on, stand up," he said. "We're leaving, all right?" He managed to bite his tongue before he said "Away from the bad people, okay?" but he felt like he was dealing with a five-year-old just the same.

After a while, Hikaru managed to focus on Akira, and stood up.

"Good. Come on, this way." Taking Hikaru's arm, Akira led him all the way out of the fast food restaurant.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 13

------(13)-----

Initially, Hikaru's parents had received the news that Akira and Hikaru were dating with shock and dismay, and had reacted by attempting to cut off all ties between them. Hikaru had put up with it for three days, before blowing up at them in a rage. Thrown objects had been involved, as had a threat to leave home.

Akira learnt all of this from Hikaru, and it explained how Hikaru's parents went from hanging up the phone on Akira, to inviting him for dinner, albeit nervously, all within a week. Since then, Hikaru's parents had approached any mention of their relationship with a bewildered acceptance that started with "Akira-kun is a very good boy-" and trailing off from there with nervous looks at Hikaru.

For this reason Akira decided not to bring Hikaru home yet.

Instead, Akira headed for the Touya residence. It was dark when he reached his home, with Hikaru at his side--dusk fell more quickly these days--and let himself in, leading him in with a firm hand-grip. They linked arms and walked together to his room, but they had to pass by the study on the way. "Fujimoto?" he said, seeing his student. "You're here?"

Hikaru roused, at what must have been the blatant surprise in his voice. "Huh. Akira?" he asked, and blinked, as though waking from deep sleep. "Kaneda-san? And Ohda-san?" He had spotted them before Akira did.

"You two are here too," Akira said, "but-"

Hikaru said, "Touya-sensei!" and clutched at him with both arms.

It was his father, Akira saw, in a kimono of sober blue, who had came out of the study. The insei made way for him, and stood

behind. "You're back, Akira," he said, and glanced at Hikaru. "Shindou-san."

Akira looked briefly at Hikaru before nodding at his father in greeting. "Yes, I'm back," he rejoined belatedly, even as Hikaru began to bow fervently in his father's direction. He grabbed Hikaru from the back by the collar of his uniform before Hikaru could bow a second time. "Stop that," he said quietly to Hikaru. "Were you playing Go?" he asked his father, looking from him to his students.

At the question, Fujimoto made a mournful face from behind Akira's father, and was promptly elbowed by Ohda. Judging from the meaningful looks aimed at him, Akira deduced that his father had led the three of them on a merciless teaching session.

"Your students have worked hard," his father said, looking from Akira to Hikaru with mild curiosity.

Akira took that to mean that his father had trounced all three of them. "Yes. I'm sure they have," he said, pointedly not looking at Fujimoto's pantomime of fainting dramatically into Ohda's arms. "I didn't schedule a teaching session today, though."

"We were going to wait for you to get back from your game, Sensei!" Kaneda said immediately.

Both Fujimoto and Ohda glared at their co-student at that, Akira noticed, and wondered at their reactions. "Oh, I see," he said. "But you could have come to see it at the Go Institute." In fact, he had heard his students discussing it a few days ago, and was puzzled that they had not turned up.

"Um, we didn't want to distract you," Kaneda said, glancing at Fujimoto and Ohda.

"Yeah," Fujimoto put in quickly.

Ohda put in, "We didn't realize you'd be back so late!"

"I was having a bite with Hikaru," Akira said. Anxious to get Hikaru away before more questions came up, he added, "Excuse me, I have something to discuss with Hikaru. Father, we're going to my room now. Fujimoto, Kaneda, Ohda, we can discuss the game another time."

Ohda nodded. "Of course, Sensei. We can do that next time we meet. We should get back now. Touya-sensei," she said to Akira's father. "Thank you for your instruction today." She bowed.

Fujimoto and Kaneda did the same, and after a few more pleasantries, they parted ways. Akira kept his arm firmly on Hikaru's shoulder until they reached his room.

Once there, Hikaru sat down on the floor in a rush, as though his feet had refused to hold him up any longer. "That was Touya-sensei!" he said.

"Yes, it was," Akira said, sitting down beside him.

"Those were your students just now."

"Yes."

"You had no teaching session today."

"Not when I have an official game, Hikaru."

"But they came anyway."

"Yes, they did. They are rather informal with me."

"And people really think that Sai is a pro," Hikaru said.

"That's right."

"Oh, good." Hikaru rubbed his eyes slowly. "I was starting to think that I imagined all of that."

"No, it really happened," Akira said.

Hikaru swallowed, and was quiet for a moment, before he turned to his schoolbag, and pulled out the stack of kifu. He tried to smooth the crumpled ones, though with limited success, and laid them out one by one.

He was placing them in some unspecified order, Akira realized. He moved to the side, to make space on the floor for Hikaru and the kifu, watching as the pieces of paper spread out in front of Hikaru in a fan-like pattern, and wondered what Hikaru had in mind, now.

Hikaru closed his eyes for a second, then opened them.

Akira bit his lip involuntarily when he saw the sharp focus in those eyes. Brilliant Go player Hikaru might be, but he seldom revealed that kind of concentration: the ability to calculate all possible permutations--at once. It was the stance of a master strategist, a type of Go player that Akira had always wanted to be. Akira was struck by the realization that he had never really seen Hikaru act like this with him before. It was as though Hikaru had not regarded him as a real opponent before. He started to bristle at the blatant challenge now.

Hikaru was talking. "I suddenly realized that there are a few weird things about these. Do you know, except for Sai, all the other players are pros?" he asked.

Distracted, Akira only said, "But my father-" In the next moment, he realized that Hikaru meant. "All the kifu are from the time the players were pros. Like the one with Father. Except for Sai."

"When I first thought that, I couldn't understand why Sai was an exception," Hikaru said. He glanced at Akira. "But if what those pro-friends of yours said is true, then people think that Sai is a pro as well."

Akira didn't bother to correct him about the part about 'friends'-- besides, he liked to think that Yashirou counted as a friend--and only waited.

Hikaru went on, "All the kifu are incomplete, but they all show the same thing: Black threatening White." He paused, and looked at Akira. "And in NetGo, Sai always plays white."

That was true. Sai's reputation on NetGo was such that it had become an accepted practice for other challengers to play as Black and start the game in lieu of a handicap. Akira frowned as the implications became clear in his mind. "You mean--"

"Someone is challenging me to enter the pro world."

"Someone who thinks you're Sai," Akira said without missing a beat.

Hikaru nodded. "Yes," he said.

Akira took a deep breath, but did not know what to say next. That explained Hikaru's earlier reaction, he thought with the part of his mind that was still calm. He felt like shouting, for some reason.

"I think," Hikaru looked down at the tatami floor, where his fingers were picking uselessly at the woven strands, "that part of me had sensed that already, at the restaurant. But I had to study the kifu again, to be sure."

"And now you're sure," Akira said.

"Yes," Hikaru said again.

Akira looked at him, trying to keep the questions from his eyes. He remembered Hikaru's determined look that afternoon, the one that accompanied his declaration to turn pro, and his admission that he *had* been playing for Sai. His heart gave a wrench. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

Hikaru shook his head. "I have to stop them from thinking that I'm Sai," he said.

Yes, Akira knew that Hikaru would be horrified to be revealed as Sai, not least because he did not consider himself to be Sai at all, even though he had been playing as Sai for years. He would do anything to prevent Sai's legacy from being diluted by being 'exposed' as Hikaru.

"After that day-" Hikaru said suddenly, and paused.

Akira frowned, trying to think which day Hikaru was referring to.

"I began to chase you," Hikaru said.

He was talking about their second game, Akira realized. No, his and Sai's second game.

Hikaru went on. "I had no idea someone my age could be like that. I watched you throw your heart and soul into a game, and I wanted that. You were right then; I had never been serious like you. I wanted to be serious like that, but I didn't know how. But then... Sai taught me."

The renewed wonder in his voice made Akira's throat tight.

"Sai taught me his Go, which was really his heart and his soul." Hikaru looked up briefly in Akira's direction, but his head dipped again before Akira could hold his gaze. "How could I chase you, if I didn't have that?"

Akira froze. Could it be that Hikaru had been chasing him after all? He had always insisted it was Sai that made him take up Go.

"But you didn't really chase me, in turn; you were chasing Sai all along," Hikaru said. "And I told you, if you kept chasing my shadow, you'd be overtaken by the real me."

Akira stared at him, not understanding why Hikaru was bringing that up. "But what are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to make sure no one touches Sai," Hikaru said. "And I'm making sure that everyone knows that Sai and I are separate people."

"Hikaru," Akira said, louder this time. "What are you going to do?"

"You'll see," Hikaru leant down and grabbed his bag, shouldering it without looking at Akira, before he walked out.

"Hikaru!"

The sheets of kifu fluttered on the floor in his wake.

That night, Sai lost a game.

Back in his room after a late shower, Akira had not meant to turn on his computer at all. Between the game with Kurata and everything with Hikaru afterwards, all he wanted to do was to go to bed, and let sleep dull his emotions. He had no idea what Hikaru meant, but it had sounded ominous, and Hikaru had not turned on his cellphone.

The game had already ended by the time he logged into the website, but already there was a long discussion on it. His exhaustion forgotten as soon as he saw the news, Akira searched for more details, and stared at the screen showing the results of a two-hour game between "SAI" and "HAL2001." The bright screen hurt his eyes. It was only half a moku, but for the first time since anyone could remember, Sai had lost. Instead, he tried to sort through his feelings of disbelief and worry, and pushed down the impulse to go over to Hikaru's place right away.

Sai had *lost*. Looking at the kifu, he could find no sign of deliberate bad hands; only a slight miscalculation here and there that had resulted in Sai's defeat. Was it because Hikaru was too rattled by

what happened that afternoon? His opponent was strong, but that had never stopped Hikaru before.

The next morning, Akira made his way to Hikaru's place.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 14

------(14)-----

For someone of Hikaru's skill at Go, it seemed unthinkable that he did not own a Go board. Not a proper one, at any rate; he had a magnetic version, and a portable set, one of those bought for the Haze Go Club a long time ago. Akira had seen Sai's Go board--or rather, Shuusaku's Go board--which was still kept in the home of Hikaru's grandfather, but no one, looking at Hikaru's room at the first glance, would be able to tell that its owner played such a traditional game regularly.

Akira looked around at the stacks of manga weighing down the bookshelves, the school textbooks on the study desk, to the sleek-looking laptop computer on the bedside table. He looked at Hikaru last.

Shindou-san had asked him to go up to Hikaru's room immediately, making no comment about the early hour, and Akira thought he understood her strange-looking expression now. Hikaru sitting in bed, hugging his knees to his chest, and seemed to be staring into space. It looked like he had been like that the whole night. Akira instantly regretted his decision not to come over immediately last night. If only he hadn't been so overwhelmed by the events of the previous day... "Hikaru?" he said.

No reply.

Akira remained still, not wanting to startle Hikaru. "Hikaru, it's me," he said.

It was a long time before he heard "Akira?" in a barely-there voice.

"Yes, it's me," Akira said, and dared to go and sit on the bed.

Hikaru suddenly grabbed him from behind. "I let Sai down!" he said against Akira's back.

"What do you mean?" Akira asked. He tried to turn around to look at Hikaru's face, but the arms around him only tightened, preventing him from doing so.

"Didn't you see that game?" Hikaru said. "Maybe you didn't see it. I played NetGo yesterday, and I-"

"I saw it," Akira said. He felt Hikaru shudder. "It was an... interesting game," he said. 'Interesting' covered a multitude of dimensions, from 'well-played' to 'disastrous'. He realized that he couldn't yet decide which shade of meaning he had in mind.

"Yeah?" Hikaru said with a sigh that felt warm and heavy. "I lost, you know."

Akira reached around, and found Hikaru's arm, giving it a squeeze.

"I don't know what happened. I thought I could do it," Hikaru whispered.

That sounded strange. "Do what, Hikaru?"

"Play more--be better at it-" Hikaru said. "Give Sai a better legacy than I have, but-"

"But-" Akira managed to stem the flow of questions that were at the tip of his tongue. "Hikaru, what exactly did you intend to do?" he asked at last.

Hikaru swallowed; Akira could feel the gulp against his back. "I thought," Hikaru said, "that since people think that Sai is a pro, and I was going to be a pro, I thought-" he paused, as though he was having difficulty in continuing. "I thought-" he tried, and stopped.

Akira thought about it, and ventured, "You thought you could improve on Sai?"

After a long time, Akira became aware of Hikaru growling in his throat. "Damn it, Touya!" Hikaru burst out. "You-you are such a jerk!"

Relieved that Hikaru sounded angry rather than miserable, Akira merely went on, "Just because so many people think that Sai is a pro, it doesn't mean that he is."

"Yeah," Hikaru said. "I figured that out halfway through the night." He sighed heavily, and his arms loosened from around Akira.

Akira disentangled himself and turned around to face Hikaru. "I should have come over last night," he said.

Hikaru shook his head. "No," he said. "I'd have just thrown you out for being so arrogant." He looked out of the window, more as a way to avoid looking at Akira than anything else, Akira felt. "I can't help feeling that I let down Sai. Or maybe killed him."

"Have you been thinking about this all night?" Akira asked. He *should* have come over earlier--not to comfort his boyfriend, but to kick some sense into him. "You could never let Sai down," he said, so frustrated that he didn't realize what he was saying, at first. "And you can't kill him."

Hikaru gave a shiver at that.

Sai is already dead.

The unsaid words seemed to echo louder than any shout.

Sai is already dead, you idiot, Akira berated himself, watching the way Hikaru's face went pale. He swallowed at the memory his words had recalled, knowing better than to apologize. Hikaru might really throw him out.

"I know," Hikaru said. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath to compose himself.

Akira placed a hand on his shoulder, and waited.

It was only a few seconds before Hikaru shook his head, dislodging Akira's arm in the process. "It's all right," he said, before he leant forward towards his laptop, and tapped a key on it. The screen came alive, showing the kifu of the game with 'HAL2001'.

Akira realized that the laptop had been placed at an angle where the screen could be easily seen from Hikaru's previous position on the bed. He sat closer to Hikaru, and let his eyes take in the shapes of black and white on the screen.

"Why does it bother me so much?" Hikaru asked, almost talking to himself, but he glanced at Akira.

"Because you lost?"

Hikaru looked down. "It shouldn't matter," he whispered, his voice rising and becoming stronger as he spoke. "It's like what I told you yesterday. Sai's heart and soul is in his Go, and his Go is inside me. I feel like shit for spoiling his record, but- that's-" he shook his head again, unwilling to go into that topic. "But he's not here. Therefore it shouldn't matter. It was just a... a stupid computer game."

Akira knew it was *not* a stupid computer game, and that it did matter to Hikaru. He remembered what Hikaru had said earlier. "You said, you were trying to 'play more'."

"Yeah," Hikaru said. "I wanted Sai to play better than ever. Better than he ever had. You did put your finger on it, you know." The look he gave Akira was tinged with reluctant admiration. "I was trying to improve on Sai."

"But you can't let Sai 'play more' without playing your own Go," Akira pointed out, inwardly deciding that listening to Hikaru talking about himself in the third person (in a manner of speaking) was particularly confusing today.

"Of course I can, I've been doing... huh?" Hikaru's mouth opened in an 'o'. "I don't get it."

Hikaru's surprise in turn surprised Akira, because it seemed logical to him. Didn't Hikaru see it? In the next moment, the answer came to him. *Of course he doesn't. Sai is a separate person to him, remember?* "Since Sai left, you've been playing as him," he said, pausing for a moment to put his thoughts into order.

Hikaru was starting to frown.

"From the time Sai left, you've been trying hard to separate yourself from Sai, so you could play as him."

Hikaru's frown intensified.

"Last night was the first time I saw Sai playing as you."

Hikaru's mouth worked, soundlessly, before he said, "That's impossible."

"Not in the least," Akira said, his mind working rapidly as he recalled the game. The entire night, he had puzzled over it despite his best attempts to calm himself, and had slept only in fits and starts. Who else did he know that played with such advanced... no, distant planning, that they seemed to be miscalculations? Even Sai did not usually go that far. Most of the time, Hikaru only played as Sai, with Sai's elaborate, brilliant skill at setting up his opponents, with Go that was as elegant as it was devastating. Hikaru the amateur, on the other hand, usually played Go with the high school Go club, or in amateur tournaments. He played, as far as most of his opponents could tell, very good, but unremarkable Go.

It was rare that Hikaru felt comfortable enough to go all out, as himself, but when he did, Akira was usually there.

Hikaru was still shaking his head and mumbling "no-no-no" to himself.

"I am the one who knows your Go the best, so I know," Akira said. "Your Go and Sai's are very different," he went on. "You don't show it

very much, but when you play with me, you have your own style. Last night, I saw both in your game with 'HAL2001'. You haven't realized it, but you've started to play as yourself more since you told me about Sai."

This assertion brought Hikaru up short. "R-really?"

Akira noted with pleasure that he was looking less strained, already, and was glad that he could at least--truthfully--give Hikaru this. "You didn't lose because Sai's Go is inferior," he assured Hikaru.

Hikaru rolled his eyes. "I know that! As though Sai would ever-" he stopped. "Then why?"

"You lost because you're trying to play as two people, Hikaru."

A scowl spread over Hikaru's face at that. Akira was reminded that despite his attempts to deny it, Hikaru had his pride about his own Go, too, however much he tried to hide it. "But that's-" Hikaru stopped, turning red.

"Yes, that's really as crazy as it sounds," Akira felt comfortable enough to tease him now.

With a yell of outrage, Hikaru promptly launched himself at Akira and tried to wrestle him to the floor.

Hikaru was trying to balance the laptop on his and Akira's knee as they sat side-by-side on the bed. They were playing NetGo game again--or at least, they were at the Hikaru's usual NetGo website, where he had logged on, and Akira wrapped an arm around Hikaru's waist as his boyfriend made pitiful sounds at lengthy on-line speculation about Sai's defeat, the identity of 'HAL2001' and whether this was 'losing Sai' was another impostor.

"They aren't even looking at the Go!" Hikaru grumbled, but inched closer to Akira.

It was certainly rather embarrassing when Shindou-san came in.

If only because Hikaru gave a start that made the laptop fall off their knees, and stuttered, "W-we weren't d-doing anything!"

Shindou-san, to her credit, kept her composure, and glared at her son. "Didn't I say to come down for breakfast?"

"But I don't feel hungry... Oh." Hikaru seemed to shrink as her glare intensified.

"It's nearly eleven," Shindou-san said. "I've made lunch early today. Both of you should come downstairs and eat something."

"Uh..." Hikaru righted his laptop and gestured at it. "But we-"

"You can play Go later," Shindou-san said firmly.

Five minutes later, Akira was sitting down at the table to watch Shindou-san ladle soup from a large steaming pot at the stove. He had eaten dinner with Hikaru's family before, but always on semi-formal occasions; never as casual as this, a normal mid-day meal with just Shindou-san.

Shindou-san turned around and set down bowls of soup. "Akira-kun is a very good boy-" she began.

Akira felt his cheeks turning warm, and resisted the urge to fidget. Those words were almost always the preliminary to a talk about his relationship with Hikaru. "Yes, Shindou-san?" he asked, doing his best to sound harmless.

"I-" Shindou-san shook her head. "It's nothing."

Akira allowed himself to breathe. He was a Go pro, and had been treated as an adult for years. But in certain matters, as with Hikaru's parents, he sometimes felt as though he was still a child.

Shindou-san went to the rice cooker, and began to fill bowls with rice. She placed them on the table, and suddenly said, "I know we-- Hikaru's father and I--found it difficult to accept Hikaru's relationship with Akira-kun."

"Um. I'm sorry-" Akira did not know why he was apologizing.

"No," Shindou-san said, shaking her head. "That's our problem, not yours. We're still getting used to the idea, but-" she smiled at him. "I was glad to see you this morning." As though suddenly embarrassed, she turned around to the stove again.

Anything else Akira wanted to say disappeared when Hikaru stumbled into the kitchen, in a yellow No. 5 shirt and worn-looking jeans. "I forgot!" Hikaru said, his arms waving as they did when he was panicked. "The school!"

"I already called the school to say you were sick," Shindou-san said.

Hikaru stopped, the wind taken from his sails. "Oh. Thanks," he said, then: "I'm hungry." His voice contained a definite whine, Akira noted.

"Then sit down, and eat your lunch." Shindou-san nodded to a seat next to Akira.

As Hikaru sat down beside him, Akira belatedly realized that she had only set the table for two. "Shindou-san, what about you?" he asked.

"I'm eating later," she said. "It's too early for me. But Hikaru didn't have any breakfast, and Akira-kun must have eaten very early, am I right?" she smiled.

Akira didn't dare to admit that he had skipped breakfast in his hurry to get to Hikaru's place, and only mumbled a reply.

Luckily, Shindou-san didn't notice, because she glanced at the kitchen clock and exclaimed that she was late for her English conversation class.

After she had gone out, Hikaru began wolfing down his lunch, as though he had been starving for days, staring at Akira the entire time.

"What, do I have something on my face?" Akira asked.

"Nope," Hikaru said, slurping his miso soup. "You really do see my Go," he said after he had put the bowl down.

"Of course."

"Even though you also know Sai's Go."

"Yes."

"Okay," Hikaru put down his chopsticks, and stared at the dish of pickles. "But do you really think I could be a pro?" he said. "I mean, the pro exam must be really, really difficult."

Akira tried not to shout at his boyfriend in his time of uncertainty.

"Yes," he managed to say. "I'm sure you'll make it."

"Really? Only three pass each year, you know." Hikaru looked glum.

"And the registration fee is so high, it'd just be a waste..."

Akira took a deep breath. "Shindou Hikaru, if you're such an idiot as to think-" he stopped.

Hikaru was laughing at him. "Gotcha!" he said.

"What?"

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Hikaru said, standing up. He leaned down, and pecked Akira on the cheek on the way towards the door. "I do have some idea of my strength, you know." He walked out of the kitchen, towards the front door.

Akira picked up the stray grain of rice that had fallen from the corner of Hikaru's lips to his lap, shaking his head. He heard the doorbell again--the person outside seemed very impatient. He stood up, wondering whether to go out there as well.

"W-Waya-san!" he heard Hikaru exclaim.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 15

------(15)-----

Hikaru's exclamation made Akira sit up, but it was Waya's next words that stiffened his spine and pushed him to his feet.

"I knew it! I knew you were Sai all along!"

Akira was out of the kitchen and in the living room before he realized it.

"What?" Hikaru was trying his best to inject indignation into his voice, but he had already retreated a step into the house. "N-nonsense!" he said, then added, "What made you think so?"

Wrong move . Akira took another step forward, taking care to stay out of sight of Waya, debating whether to interrupt. The sight of Akira would only increase Waya's belligerence, but it might also distract the latter from pushing Hikaru into an inadvertent confession about Sai.

"I know." Waya's confident tone only increased in intensity. "You played as Sai last night. I've been spending all morning tracking your internet connection to here."

Hikaru took another step backwards. His gaze turned right and left, as though looking for an escape, and caught sight of Akira. Akira placed a finger to his lips. "I-" Hikaru said, and looked back towards Waya, terrified.

"Don't even try to deny it, " Waya said. "You're the person everyone has been trying to find for years, Shindou!"

"What?" Hikaru said, his jaw falling open.

"No wonder you've been leading in our game," Waya went on.

It took Akira a second to realize that Waya was referring to the verbal game of Go between him and Hikaru. So Waya had been losing the game. He had guessed that.

"T-that's different," Hikaru said, beginning to regain his composure as the topic changed from Sai.

"No, it isn't," Waya said. "I was puzzled at first to find an amateur like you playing so well, but now I know why. It's because you're Sai."

Hikaru froze. "What did you say?" he asked. He took an actual step forward, all trace of panic disappearing from his face.

"I said, 'I was puzzled to find an amateur like you playing so well, but now-' "

"What the hell!" Hikaru burst out, his face turning red with alarming rapidity. "Y-you patronizing jerk!" His sudden reaction made Waya jump visibly.

Akira frowned, watching the two of them.

"Out!" Hikaru shouted, taking yet another step forward so that he was nose to nose with Waya, glaring fiercely enough to make the other man retreat.

Waya was obviously confused. "What's wrong with you? I only said-"

"Out! Get out!" Hikaru pushed him out, and closed the door with a slam. "Asshole!" he shouted, and slumped against the door, panting. Then he slid down, his head braced between his knees.

Akira was by his side before he knew it. "Hikaru! Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah..." Hikaru said after a long second, still catching his breath. He took a moment to take a deep breath, and accepted Akira's help in getting up, his hands squeezing Akira's almost painfully. Akira squeezed back. Then Hikaru released him and turned to the door,

jiggling the doorknob as though to reassure himself that the door was truly closed. Then he locked it with quick, determined actions. "Do me a favour and check the window, okay?" he said. "See if he's still there."

"No, he isn't. He's walking away," Akira said, looking. He could see Waya's figure disappearing from his line of sight around the corner.

"Good," Hikaru said with vicious satisfaction.

A dozen questions were at the tip of Akira's lips. Why did he get so angry at what Waya said? Was it because it was unusual that he played a good game of Go? Or was it because he had called Hikaru an amateur?

"Let's go and eat more lunch," Hikaru said, interrupting Akira's thoughts. "Getting angry always makes me hungry." Without waiting for Akira to reply, he stalked to the dining room.

Bemused, Akira followed him, to find him scooping more rice into his bowl, and sitting down without another word as he began to shovel rice grimly into his mouth. He grumbled under his breath from time to time.

Akira sat down and waited. Idly, he wondered what the other participants in the Go Exam would make of Hikaru. As someone who had played Go on the internet on an almost exclusive basis, Hikaru was used to reacting freely, instantaneously and loudly, to what he perceived were offensive gestures by his opponents. The pro world, however, valued self-discipline and decorum--Hikaru was going to shock them, and not just because of his Go skills.

It was going to be something to look forward to.

Hikaru finished the contents of his bowl and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "That jerk," he said thickly, before he swallowed. "As though the only reason I play well, is because I play as Sai. If I hadn't played as Sai, if I wasn't Sai, he'd continue to think that I'm

just another lousy amateur. Even though I was winning our game. Damn it!" he said, putting down his chopsticks with a loud clatter. "I'm this close to forgetting about turning pro, Akira!" He held out a hand towards Akira, measuring a hairsbreadth between thumb and finger.

"Are you?" Akira asked.

Hikaru's look of anger deflated, and he placed both hands on the table, drumming his fingers restlessly. "Well, no..." he said. "But if I become a pro, it'd just prove him right: that only pros can play good Go, and amateurs can't."

Akira reflected on the tendency of some Go professionals to adopt such an outlook. His father had always told him never to underestimate an opponent simply because they were not professionals. He found that out for himself at the age of twelve, when Hikaru had walked into the Go salon for the first time, and played his first game. Even after learning that it was actually Sai who played with him, the lesson stayed. "There are seven hundred pros in this country, Hikaru," he said. "Not everyone thinks like him."

"Huh." Hikaru's expression became blank--a look of a proper Go pro, a part of Akira observed with repressed excitement--before he nodded. "I guess. Like your dad. Even Kurata-san."

Akira was reminded of Kurata's comment that it was lucky that Hikaru was not a pro--it seemed that even though he did not know of Hikaru's true skill, Kurata sensed his innate ability. But then Kurata's intuition was legendary.

"And those insei students of yours..." Hikaru muttered. Then his expression sharpened with eagerness. "Hey, if I become a pro--"

" *When* you become a pro," Akira emphasized.

Hikaru grinned abashedly, before he grew sober again. "Well, when do you think I'll be able to play with him? Waya, I mean."

Akira thought of Waya's 5-dan status, which placed him among the upper ranks of the pros; realistically speaking, it was unlikely that a new pro would be able to meet him in an official game within the short term. Then he looked at Hikaru's intent expression. 'Realistic' was not a word used to describe him.

"You want to play against him in an official game? You're already winning the game you had with him, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but he didn't play his best because he thought I was an amateur," Hikaru said. He scowled at that.

"That's why you got so angry at him," Akira said.

Hikaru stopped drumming his fingers and crossed his arms. "The stupidest thing you can do in Go, or anywhere, is to underestimate your opponents," he lectured.

Akira reflected that this was even more evident in the world of NetGo, where anyone could play. "If you win all your games, you should be meeting him very soon in an official game."

"Huh," Hikaru considered, then eyed Akira. "And how soon would it be, before I got to play with you?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"An official game with you, Akira. Touya 8-dan, right?" he asked, then frowned. "Or was it 9-dan? Or 7-dan? Or-"

"You were right the first time," Akira said, before Hikaru could downgrade his ranking any further.

Hikaru grinned, and made a thumbs-up gesture at him.

"It's the same," Akira said, answering his question. "If you keep winning all your games, we will meet in an official game sooner or later."

Hikaru made a face. "I think it might be 'later'. I know how tournaments are run. At least, amateur ones. These professional things probably take even longer, like, months! It won't happen that quickly." He groaned dramatically, placing the back of his hand over his forehead. "I can't wait that long," he declared. Then he leant back and regarded Akira.

After a few seconds, Akira raised his eyebrows. "Are you expecting me to say something?"

Hikaru grinned. "Go on, challenge me to a game. I promise to play my best, not as Sai, but as myself, but you have to challenge me first."

Akira took a second to imprint the way Hikaru looked, into his memory: his bony collarbone showing through the thin cotton fabric, the shock of blond hair standing out from the rest of his black hair, and the wide, mischievous grin on his face. "I think," he said carefully, "this time, you should challenge me."

The grin disappeared.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 16

------(16)-----

Akira waited, a part of him becoming the calm, analytical Go professional who habitually observed the situation while facing an opponent. The fact was, Hikaru had never really challenged anyone to a game before--how could he, when to do so would involve him revealing the true extent of his Go skills?

In the school Go club and in amateur Go, Hikaru had been goaded, dared, challenged, and even begged into games, but never had he taken upon himself to issue his own challenges. When he did, it was only in NetGo, and after so many years, Sai had no real need to search for opponents; challengers flocked to him as a matter of course. It was as though Sai had remained in the same spot all these years.

"You want me to challenge you," Hikaru said, sounding almost puzzled, as though the concept was alien to him.

Akira said, "Yes."

Hikaru's brow drew together. "Akira, you are a pro," he said.

And you're Sai, Akira thought, but he only replied, "You've played with me before."

"Yeah," Hikaru said. "But I... I see." His posture straightened, and his chin rose, slowly. He suddenly seemed to be looking down at Akira from a faraway place. The effect was like that of a god looking down at ordinary mortals: unfeeling and impartial. "Touya Akira, I challenge you to a game of Go."

Akira shivered inwardly, but he merely stood up and stared down at Hikaru in return. "I accept your challenge, Shindou Hikaru," he said, managing to keep his voice even.

Hikaru nodded. "Good."

The air seemed to shift.

Akira held his breath. The bowls and chopsticks on the table, and the implements around the kitchen: all looked alien all of a sudden. They were wrong. His fingers itched for Go stones to hold, and his feet felt restless; he wanted to be sitting in front of a Go board, not here. Even the shapes of the kitchen seemed insubstantial, in a world where the only reality was Go.

It seemed to Akira that Hikaru had a similar feeling, for his eyes were flickering around the kitchen as though questioning their existence. Suddenly, he seemed to have thought of something. He stood up as well. "Come on, I have to show you something." Without waiting, he made his way towards the stairs, towards his bedroom.

Akira re-entered the room, looking around curiously. He had helped Hikaru to tidy up just before they went downstairs, and he thought that Hikaru's bedroom, at least, held no further surprises for him.

But Hikaru was heading for the bed and crawled under it without hesitation.

"Hikaru, what-"

Hikaru was suddenly waving his arms and legs wildly, looking as though he was demonstrating swimming strokes on the floor. "'m stuck, Akira," came the muffled words. "Help!"

After a second of hesitation, Akira bent down and pulled at Hikaru's feet by the ankles. It did seem as though he was stuck; Akira was panting by the time he unearthed Hikaru--and a large cardboard box, around which Hikaru had wrapped both arms.

"Thanks," Hikaru gasped, sitting up slowly. "It was wedged in the corner," he said of the box.

"What is it?"

In answer, Hikaru peeled away the masking tape holding the sides of the box together, and opened it. His lips were pressed together in a straight line, as though he was trying to restrain strong emotions.

"I didn't know you had this," Akira said, looking down at the Go board that Hikaru set out in front of him. He had been thinking before that it was a pity that Hikaru did not own a proper Go board, only his magnetic one and a portable set, and it had been surprising to see Hikaru unearth the four-legged board from under his bed.

"Grandpa bought it for me, when I beat him in a game," Hikaru said, wiping it down with a soft cloth. The cloth came away grey with dust; Hikaru sneezed as some of it flew up into his face.

"You haven't been using it. Why?" Akira asked. When he played with Hikaru, they always used the portable set.

Hikaru sneezed again. "Sai-" he paused to wipe his nose on his sleeve, "and I played on it together, when he was here. When he left, I stopped playing..." he looked at Akira. "Remember?"

Akira nodded. He and Hikaru were still trying to be friends then, but he remembered being furious at Hikaru's sudden refusal to play Go. It had seemed yet another example of Hikaru's feckless attitude towards Go. He had not realized until much later that everything had changed when Hikaru began playing again.

"I couldn't bear to look at it anymore, so I shoved it under the bed," Hikaru said, wiping the go-ke now. "Even when I started playing again, I didn't want to use it."

"Why now, then?"

Hikaru shrugged. "It just seemed right." Then he paused and looked at Akira, pushing the go-ke forward. "It's the right time, for me to take back everything that Sai taught me. I won't hide any longer."

Those first two games with Hikaru--Sai--years ago at the Go salon had lingered in his mind for weeks, even months. Akira had concluded that even his trials as a pro could never match the excitement and the fears he had felt then. It was a watershed. Playing again with Hikaru a few years later, when Hikaru showed virtually none of the genius that characterized those two games, had been enjoyable, but only because it was Hikaru, a friend who was neither bothered nor pressurized by the tag 'Go prodigy' that followed Akira everywhere, and later, because it was Hikaru, his boyfriend.

Now, he was finding that the person he had been missing was Hikaru, consummate Go player.

He had long suspected, of course, that Hikaru knew more Go than he cared to show--those first two games, and the game he had observed at Kaio refused to be dismissed as mere flukes, despite Hikaru's poor showing at the actual Kaio tournament--but Hikaru had never showed his hand. He had unveiled brilliant tactics at times, in their casual games, but he never really followed up on those. Even after Akira realized that Hikaru was really Sai, he still found it difficult to connect the kifu on the computer printouts with the person he had known since he was twelve.

That perception was changing now.

It overwhelmed him to play with someone who knew the Go board inside out. It was not simply the sensation of playing with Sai (again), but with someone who played as though he lived through Go, and it made Akira feel as though he had been struck on the head and given the task of navigating a trap-filled maze. It was petrifying. It was thrilling. It was also infuriatingly offensive.

The second time Hikaru cut off his line of attack with a hand that should have been foolhardy, but had proven to be the reverse (as had happened the first time round), Akira took it personally.

"Damn it, Shindou Hikaru!" he shouted, earning a shocked look from Hikaru.

"... w-what?" Hikaru's fingers shook, nerveless, in his go-ke, so that some of the stones inside spilled to the floor.

Akira drew breath. "Why couldn't you have played like this years ago!" he demanded.

"But I-" Hikaru scooped up the fallen stones and dropped them into the go-ke. "I-" he started to frown. "I couldn't, okay?" he retorted. He placed a stone as though daring Akira to take it.

Pachi!

Akira promptly snapped it up, seeing an opportunity in the ko that would form. "You-you big jerk!" he said, not knowing if he were berating Hikaru for not playing at full strength, or for allowing the opening to appear.

"M-me?" Hikaru made a growling noise in his throat, his glare intensifying. He slapped a stone down so fiercely that the stone wobbled, knocking into the stones beside it.

Akira noticed that it was a hane, designed to swing around one of Akira's crucial stones and take over the territory enclosed there. "All the times you pretended that you couldn't even play on my level," he said, raising both voice and hand, choosing to draw the struggle right into Hikaru's own secured territory with his black stone. "When you could play like this!" He placed the stone at that point, to punctuate his point.

"I didn't want you to guess I was Sai!" Hikaru said. He narrowed his eyes at Akira's hand, and replied, back at the ko fight.

"I've been guessing you were Sai since we played that NetGo game! Didn't you realize that, or are you just that stupid?"

"S-stupid!" Hikaru leaned forward, nearly upsetting his go-ke. "I'm not stupid! I wouldn't have been so serious about hiding my skills if you didn't keep accusing me of being Sai!"

"I only did that once!" Akira replied, choosing not to acknowledge that in his mind, he kept connecting the two of them. Instead, he captured another stone, dropping it onto the go-ke lid from a higher point than usual, letting it make a particularly loud clatter as it fell.

"You thought it!" Hikaru accused. He glared at the captured stones beside Akira, as though wishing that they would spontaneously burst into flames.

"And I was right," Akira said, raising his chin to stare pointedly at him. "Your move."

"I know..." Hikaru grabbed a stone and holding it between thumb and forefinger--as he always did when agitated--he slammed it down. "There!"

Good opportunity: Akira barely paused to consider before making further inroads into Hikaru's territory with a stone at the far edge, attempting to take the territory there from both directions. Hikaru could come back and protect it, or he could try to win the ko fight instead--either way, he would be wasting valuable hands while Akira pushed his advantage.

Hikaru glanced down, and Akira sensed that he had analyzed the situation at a look. "Are you always this hard-assed?" he grumbled. To Akira's surprise, he played at another place altogether--at 1-1, in the middle of still unclaimed territory.

"Are you always so irrational when you play?" Akira said, trying to see how that hand could connect with the rest of the board. With another player, he might have assumed that it was just a fake-out, but he could not afford to make the same kind of hasty judgment with Hikaru.

"Yeah, so what?" Hikaru said. He waited till Akira had played another hand at the ko fight, and played 1-2.

Still ignoring his hand. "The problem with you, Shindou, is that you flip-flop like a dying fish on this Go board," Akira said, and had a minor shock at realizing he had said 'Shindou', as though Hikaru was another professional like himself. "Can't you concentrate?"

"And the problem with you, Touya, is that you can't think your way out of a paper bag." Hikaru seemed not to have noticed the change in address, and instead made the same switch as well.

"At least I don't make up my strategies on the spot." He played a stone, choosing to sacrifice his stones at the lower corner.

Hikaru snorted. "At least I don't play like a robot," he said, building up his group at the edge.

"Spreading your stones all over like this is just unfocused," Akira criticized as he played another stone.

"It's called multi-tasking, Mr. Stodgy." Hikaru slapped another stone down.

"It's untidy play," Akira sniffed.

"Better than your aim-and-shoot approach."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Yeah, it's fine if you're playing pachinko."

Akira spluttered, then rallied. "Slob!"

"Computer!"

"Insane!"

"Space alien!"

They kept playing, and shouting. Hikaru said at one point: "Just so you know, you're not distracting me at all by insulting me."

"Nor are you," Akira returned loftily, and continued his attacks. He pushed the ko fight to the edge, but Hikaru launched a comeback by somehow summoning a taisha formation. Akira started to grind his teeth from pure aggravation, before he stopped. Forming a taisha was a strategy that worked best at the beginning, when both players had the wide expanse of the Go board to work on--not at the endgame stage when staked-out territories added multiple layers of complexity. No one played a taisha at this stage!

Except Hikaru, it seemed.

Akira tried to hold him off, but his attempts only took away his opportunities for defending his territories.

Hikaru muttered "Hah!" under his breath.

Trying not to retort, Akira scanned the board for vulnerabilities to exploit, but found them well guarded. Hikaru had planned far too well. This was not Sai he was facing, or even a side of Sai. Sai had always played solid, beautiful Go, with classical shapes and superior strategy. Hikaru, on the other hand, played without regard for classical or traditional shapes, creating Go that built around itself like a spiral, its reach widening with each increasing stone. He was outmanoeuvred, finally.

Hikaru was still frowning at the Go board, but he, too, had stilled, and was leaning forward slightly, as though waiting for something.

Akira gave a sigh. It was not as though he had not expected the outcome, deep in his heart. "I have nothing, you... amateur."

At first, it seemed as though Hikaru had not heard him, but then Hikaru whispered, "Thank you for the game."

"Thank you for the game," he said in return, and felt a sense of release as the game ended. He sat back, out of breath, looking at Hikaru. In Hikaru's eyes were the reflection of the game between them, the white and black stones that had laid plain their mutual affinity for the Go, their triumphs and losses on the Go board. He saw that Hikaru's eyes were reddened, but his expression was calm.

A woman's voice came into range all of a sudden, like a visitation. "... Hikaru, how many times have I told you to clear the table after eating? I bought a copy of *Go Weekly* for you..." The door opened.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the door open, and Shindou-san enter.

"And has Akira-kun gone back-" Shindou-san froze, letting the door slid shut gently behind her. "Oh."

Akira finally looked away and raised his head in Shindou-san's direction. She had just come back, he could see--she was still wearing the dark-coloured jacket she had gone out in--with her face reddened by the cold. She was staring at the Go board, as though she was unable to believe her eyes, and as he watched, her eyes flickered to Hikaru, and back again to the Go board.

Akira had thought before that Shindou-san must have known something about Hikaru's sorrows, for all that she pretended to be oblivious--complaining good-naturedly to Akira about Hikaru's 'strange' behaviour, saying that she knew nothing about Go--and seemed contented only to see to his meals and clothes. Yes, she probably knew.

"Oh, Hikaru," Shindou-san said, and Akira was not surprised to see tears on her cheeks.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 17

------(17)-----

Shindou-san saw Akira to the gate, after dinner. She did not say much save for polite inquiries about the well being of Akira's parents, but she surprised him by hugging him briefly. "I haven't seen that Go board for years," she said.

Akira nodded uncertainly.

"It's a good sign, that he's willing to use it again," she said, almost to herself, and released him from the hug, and patted him on the shoulder. "Take care on the way back, Akira-san," she said, nodding at him.

He bowed slightly. "Good night, Shindou-san." He hesitated, and was suddenly seized with the impulse to tell her everything he knew about Sai, to relieve the unspoken anxiety in her eyes. But he bit his lips on the words; it was not his secret to tell.

It was late by the time Akira reached home. His parents were already asleep. Akira looked out of the window at the twinkling stars, suddenly remembered Hikaru's musings that the stars were like Go stones, and let the memory lull him to sleep.

All next day, he was haunted by a sense of unease, as though some important errand had slipped his mind. He searched his memories, but could not recall what it was. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that when he checked his phone in the morning, he found that it was crammed with messages. He read the first few, but they were all variants on requests for him to return his calls. He had no time to do any more before he started work.

He had his previously cancelled teaching sessions to make up, and it was only until late afternoon that he realized what had been going

on. Returning from a student's home, he stepped into the Go salon to see a crowd gathered around Hikaru.

"What's going on?" he asked, raising his voice to make himself heard by the loudly talking customers. He looked around for Ichikawa, but she was nowhere to be found.

Hikaru looked up at the sound of his voice. "Akira!" he exclaimed and, as the crowd separated to let Akira through, he sprang up and rushed to him.

It did not escape his notice that Hikaru was trying not to hide behind him, nor that Hikaru's eyes held a particularly wild look. Carefully, he raised an arm and placed it on Hikaru's shoulders, holding him close, hoping to brace him. When he left last night, Hikaru had been fine: serious-minded, a little teary over Sai, but he had behaved much like his usual self. "What happened?" he asked. When Hikaru refused to answer, he repeated the question, looking at the rest.

The customers, as a group, seemed to hesitate at his direct question. Kitajima opened his mouth as though to blurt out something, but thought better of it, and avoided Akira's eyes.

Akira scanned the crowd again. "Kaneda?" he identified his student, who had been lurking at the edge of the crowd. "And Ohda?" he said.

The two of them nodded awkwardly in greeting. "Sensei," they said in unison, and Ohda, as though anticipating his question, blurted, "It's Sai."

Akira could feel Hikaru stiffen. "What do you mean?" he asked, and tightened his arm.

Ohda glanced at Kaneda, as though in silent communication. "Shindou-san... they say that he's actually Sai. On the internet," she clarified.

" *Who* said that?"

"Someone made an anonymous post on the NetGo noticeboard, yesterday afternoon," Kaneda said. He was starting to lose his apprehension. "I came and told everybody." He looked eagerly at Akira, as though expecting a sign of approval. "I know that you've been searching for Sai for a long time, Sensei!"

Kitajima interrupted. "I know that Touya-sensei and his father have both played with Sai, and we all know Shindou-san. So when he got here," he nodded at Hikaru, "we asked him about it. We didn't expect him to freeze up on us!" He frowned at Hikaru. "He can't be Sai, Touya-sensei!" he declared. "He's just a punk. And he's always losing to you when he plays with you."

A low murmur of agreement accompanied his words.

"-yeah, he's just a high school kid!"

"He plays in amateur tournaments-"

"-he's dating Touya-sensei-"

Hikaru's face looked paler than ever, and he was shaking. Ohda looked profoundly uncomfortable, as though wishing she was anywhere but there.

"Or has he been lying all this time..."

That touched a nerve, for Hikaru promptly shouted, "I'm not Sai!"

"Really?" someone asked. Others made skeptical faces.

Hikaru looked around at all of them. "I told you just now, and I'm going to say it again. I am not Sai."

"But everyone on the NetGo website said you were," Kaneda said. "If you're really Sai, can I play a game with you?" He was watching Hikaru fiercely, eyes never leaving his face.

"Kaneda!" Akira admonished.

"How many times do I have to say it!" Hikaru shouted. "I'm not Sai. Sai is another person, and that person is-" he stopped.

"What?" Kaneda asked. "Are you really Sai?"

"Kaneda Takeshi, stop talking!" Ohda shoved him none-too-gently on the shoulder. "When you told me you had a surprise this morning, I didn't expect it to be this!"

Kaneda ignored her. "Shindou-san?" he said.

Hikaru glared at him so fiercely that Kaneda's earnestness finally faltered. He shook himself free of Akira's arm, and took a step towards him, both fists clenched and his face set. He looked ready to start a fight.

"Hikaru..." Akira whispered.

"Whoever Sai is, it's none of your business." Hikaru continued to glare at him, and deliberately turned his head to regard all of them, even Akira. "All he ever wanted was to play Go. He existed just to play Go. Why can't you just accept that?"

The pain in his words struck Akira, and he reached reflexively for Hikaru.

"Why do you have to keep searching for him?" Hikaru demanded, his voice growing hoarse. "Do you think you can just make him appear if you harass me long enough? Believe me, if you can do that, I'd let you. I want to see Sai too!"

Akira found Hikaru's hand, and held it tightly.

"I want him to come back..." Hikaru choked, turning towards him.

Silence fell at that.

" 'Come back'?" Kaneda asked. "What do you mean by that?"

Hikaru raised his head, and paled. "N-nothing."

"Yes, you did!" Kaneda said, clearly intent on getting to the bottom of it all.

Hikaru shook his head wildly. "No... no," he said.

Before anyone else could say a thing, Ichikawa suddenly appeared. "That's enough!" she said, squeezing past the crowd. "We're running a Go salon here, not a shouting club." She did not look at Hikaru. "Some of you are old enough to know better, right?"

Some of the customers shuffled their feet uneasily.

Ichikawa frowned. "I only went downstairs to get rid of the reporters, and the lot of you-"

"Reporters?" Akira asked.

"From *Everybody Go!* and *Electric Go*," Ichikawa said.

Akira puzzled over the names for a second, before realizing that they were Go magazines geared towards amateur players. Hikaru had a few issues of both in his room.

"They showed up this morning," Ichikawa went on. "You must have just missed them when you came in, Akira. They saw Shindou-san come in and wanted to interview him." She shook her head. "All right, everybody, back to your games. No hassling of other customers. Akira, Shindou-san..."

"We're going home," Akira nodded thanks to her, and half-dragged Hikaru towards the exit.

By tacit consent, they made their way to the Touya residence, where Akira led Hikaru to his room.

Once there, Hikaru shook off his arm sat down on the tatami, lost in thought. A knock at the door made him jump.

"Who is it?" Akira asked immediately.

The door slid open an inch. "It's us," Fujimoto said. "Ohda and me. We've just arrived as well."

"Where's Kaneda?"

"Here too, but he's not allowed to say anything," Fujimoto said. "He was making a nuisance of himself at the Go salon. He's just too young to understand, Sensei."

Akira repressed a sigh. Kaneda was Go-mad, he had known that. "Hikaru, can they come in?" he asked.

Hikaru looked as though he would like to refuse, but he nodded after a second.

"Come in, then," Akira said.

Fujimoto, Ohda and Kaneda entered, closing the door firmly behind them, and seated themselves quickly. Kaneda put himself where he could stare at Hikaru directly, until Akira shot him a warning look. He looked down at his hands after that.

"I heard that even *Go Weekly* wants to interview Shindou-san," Fujimoto said. "Usually it only concerns itself with news about pros, but the news about Sai seems to be the exception."

Hikaru stiffened.

Akira squeezed his hand. He turned to Fujimoto and Ohda. "People claim to be Sai all the time," he said, "so why are people taking this so seriously?"

Ohda answered, "Because whoever posted the news also revealed that Shindou goes by 'Starmaker', and lots of people have been

checking ISP addresses."

Hikaru sat up at that. "W-what?" he asked.

"It's not really difficult to do," Fujimoto said apologetically. "It's only because most people respected Sai's desire to be private that no one tried tracing it."

"But now that Sai's cover has been blown, so as to speak," Ohda added, "everyone's leaping in with their theories."

"Shindou-san is well known among amateur players, and there are people who are comparing kifu from Shindou-san's tournament games with Sai's as well," Fujimoto said.

Hikaru sat up. "Really?"

Fujimoto nodded. "There's been a lot of discussion over the internet, Shindou-san. I tried to get hold of you, Sensei," he said to Akira, "but your phone was switched off all day yesterday and this morning."

Akira nodded absently.

"First Sai lost a game, and now they're saying that Shindou-san is Sai..." Ohda muttered. "This is big news. Everyone will be looking for Shindou-san to confirm or deny it."

"No." Hikaru grabbed Akira's hand as though it was a lifesaver. "What should I do?" His momentary burst of anger had burnt itself out, leaving him panic-stricken again.

"It's best if you don't play as Sai for the time being, Shindou-san," Fujimoto said.

It took but a split second for Akira to get his meaning; Hikaru looked up, his jaw dropping.

Ohda looked just as shocked. "Wait a minute," she said, glancing at Hikaru. "You've known all along? That Shindou-san is Sai?"

"You-you knew? For sure?" Kaneda asked. "How?"

"Because I'm not stupid?" Fujimoto retorted. "We all saw his game with Ochi, but before that, I saw his face when Waya-sensei accused him of being Sai. No offense, Shindou-san, but a five-year-old wouldn't buy the excuse you gave him. I got to thinking. As soon as I realized it, I knew why Shindou-san had been so secretive about his Go skills."

It was not without reason that Fujimoto was the best of his students, Akira thought. But Hikaru was twitching.

"So, I thought, we had to get him to turn pro-" Fujimoto stopped talking, sounding strangled.

"Eh-" Ohda began uneasily.

"I didn't know," Kaneda said. "Why didn't you say anything? I wouldn't have insisted on so many Sai kifu if I had known-" he stopped as Fujimoto placed a hand over his mouth.

Akira realized what was going on, and studied all three of his students. "I see."

Hikaru glanced up, distracted by his cold tone. "What is it?"

"They're the ones who have been sending you kifu."

"It was my idea!" Fujimoto owned up, glancing at his fellow students, who were wincing.

Hikaru frowned. "How did you figure that?" he asked Akira.

"I sometimes lend some of my kifu records to them," Akira said. "They must have helped themselves to some that I considered private." He narrowed his eyes at them. "Remember the game that they sent you, the one of mine and Katagi 2-dan? I told you that I was the only one who knew of this game, other than Katagi-san."

"You were stalking me?" Hikaru asked the three of them. "Why?"

"Trying to get you to turn pro, Shindou-san," Ohda said, with an air of confession. "We discussed it after your game with Ochi, and we thought you were too good to remain an amateur."

"We wanted to give him a challenge," Fujimoto said, "and to do that, we sent him kifu of lots and lots of pro games. Kaneda insisted on sending the ones with Sai."

"Sai just has to be a pro, I said," Kaneda insisted.

"Only he isn't," Fujimoto said. "He's Shindou-san."

"I am not Sai," Hikaru repeated. "You're as bad as Kaneda."

Fujimoto frowned. "Even if you wanted to, it'd be too difficult to deny it. There's a ton of discussion on the NetGo website, Shindou-san."

"I want to see for myself," Hikaru said, surprising all of them. "Akira, can I use your computer?"

He meant the NetGo discussions, Akira thought, and nodded. Without hesitation, Hikaru went to his computer and turned it on. Kaneda, Fujimoto, and Ohda gathered behind him.

The webpage for the NetGo website soon appeared, but something looked different. Instead of a sign-in page, there was a notice stating that due to heavy traffic from members about Sai's identity, the website was temporarily down.

Hikaru leant back heavily in his chair. "That's it," he said. "I've broken NetGo."

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 18

There were many websites for internet Go, of course, but NetGo was one of the most popular, and one of the largest. Amateur players in particular favoured it because it was free, easy to use, and best of all, it had Sai. It was no secret that a lot of professional players also used it for the last reason.

Akira stared at the message on the screen. "It wasn't like this yesterday," he said. "Not when we were looking through it."

"No," Hikaru said. "It was pretty active, but that's nothing unusual." He rubbed his eyes, peeking through his fingers now and then, as though hoping to see a different message. But there was no change. Something else occurred to him then, and he typed in the addresses for another popular internet Go website.

"I didn't know you also played on 'Weiqi 123', Shindou-san," Ohda remarked.

"Only occasionally," Hikaru said as he logged in, this time using a string of letters and numbers that made no sense. Immediately, someone invited him to a game, which he rejected, and entered the forum section.

Akira was not surprised that although the website was working, the biggest topic under discussion was Sai.

Hikaru scrolled through the forum, and groaned. "It's here too." He exited the website, and went to another one, this time a Korean one that Akira had never heard of: 'Baduk-Net'. He logged in as well, this time using 'Hikaru'. Everything was in Korean, with bits of English words here and there.

"Shindou-san, you know Korean?" Fujimoto asked.

"I don't even know how to work this site!" Hikaru said, scowling.
"Usually, I just hang around until someone invites me to a game. It's just one of the smaller sites that I know of..." He blinked as a message popped up.

Akira could read it after a fashion, but he did not bother to translate for the others. He did not need to: the word 'SAI' was all over the message.

"Argh, not you, too!" Hikaru groaned, and buried his head in his hands.

The three insei glanced at one another uncertainly.

Akira laid a hand on Hikaru's shoulder. "Hikaru?"

"I shouldn't have got up this morning," Hikaru mumbled between his fingers. "Things were just fine last night, you know?" he looked up at Akira. "I told my dad that I might be trying for the Go exams, and he laughed, and said, sure, if that was what I really wanted. My mum just nodded, like she knew all along."

Kaneda straightened at that news, his face lighting up, and Ohda and Fujimoto stared at each other.

Akira squeezed Hikaru's shoulder. "Sounds like you've made up your mind, then."

"Yeah. And last night I dreamt of-" Hikaru abruptly realized that they weren't alone, and pressed his lips firmly together, his face turned towards the computer screen but obviously not seeing anything on it.

Sai. Akira was sure of it. He glanced at the insei.

Fujimoto took the hint. "Come on, let's go to the classroom," he said to Kaneda and Ohda.

"But I wanted to ask-" Kaneda began, and Fujimoto glared at him.

"You aren't allowed to talk, remember? Sensei and Shindou-san need to talk privately. Ohda?"

"I know," Ohda nodded, as she stood up and thumped Kaneda on the back. "Come along, Kaneda-kun."

" 'Kaneda-kun'?" Kaneda protested, as she and Fujimoto pulled him out of the room, and closed the door.

That left only themselves and the faint drone of the computer. Akira reached out and gently clicked the link to log off, and shut down the computer after that. Hikaru was still staring into space. "Hikaru?" he asked, pulling him down so they could sit together on the tatami.

"I dreamt of him last night," Hikaru said, his eyes still focused on nothing. "Sai was there." He swallowed. "I mean, he really was, you know. Not like the times when I dreamt about the past. It was like he entered my dreams, this time." There was a tone of wonder in his voice.

It was Akira's turn to swallow. Although he finally knew the truth about Sai, the idea of being haunted by a ghost for years still filled him with a sense of the impossible. He couldn't imagine what it was like, to be glad at the certainty that someone--something--otherworldly had entered his dreams.

"And you know what? It was like he was with me again," Hikaru said. "I wasn't alone anymore."

Akira could feel his heart give a leap at that. At the beginning, he had hoped that he would be enough, to help salve the loneliness Hikaru always seemed to feel, and to take away the lost expression in his eyes. On the surface, he had told himself that it was because Hikaru played a good game of Go and they got along well. But the first impulse to become closer to Hikaru--to start dating him--had come from the urge to shelter him from every pain.

"He was still standing there, in those funny clothes and that big hat. Just standing there, like the other times I dreamt of him. But he was smiling, Akira." The delight was obvious in Hikaru's voice.

Akira managed to nod, though it was likely Hikaru had not noticed it. He was talking again.

"He's never really smiled in my dreams. Just stood there, like he was waiting for me to do something. And this time, guess what?" He didn't wait for Akira to reply, but went on, "He gave me his fan! He used to use it as a pointer when he played Go with me. I took it, and he smiled again." Hikaru laughed suddenly, as though in sudden realization. "I get it! He must be telling me to play more Go, huh? Maybe he knows that I was planning to take the Pro exams, and he was encouraging me!"

Akira jerked as though he had been slapped. "Oh."

"Yeah. It was like we were together again."

"T-that's great." Akira was relieved that his voice sounded normal. As though he was standing from a long distance away, he watched his right hand, resting on his knee, clench on itself, as though in a spasm.

Hikaru noticed it. He grabbed Akira's hand. "What's your problem?" he asked. "I thought you'd be happy for me! Sai supports me!"

The idea that Shindou depended on that approval chilled Akira to the bone. It was as though they were taking three steps forward, and two back, he thought, and Go did not play out like that. No one who played Go could accept that. What would become of Hikaru's Go, if he continued like this?

"Akira?" Hikaru said.

He had waited for Hikaru to shine all by himself for so long, not for this to happen. He looked up slowly, watching the momentary

happiness on Hikaru's face fade away, to be replaced by hurt. "I think I'm angry with Sai," he said, and watched Hikaru's expression turn to confusion.

"W-why?" Hikaru asked.

Akira looked down at his knees, and found that both his hands, resting there, were now intertwined with Hikaru's, the tanned skin on Hikaru's hands forming a contrast with Akira's own pale ones. Contrary to appearance, it was Akira's hands that were rougher, with calluses on the fingertips from holding Go stones for hours each day. Hikaru's hands were soft all over, marked only by the random scratches of daily life. Akira stared at them, willing strength into them.

Then Hikaru pulled away, so that Akira's hands were empty. "Why are you angry with Sai?" he asked again.

"I-" Akira stopped, and the words, long held inside him, spoke themselves. "I'm angry at him for making you so sad."

"What-"

Akira went on. "For making you feel that you can't really play without him, so that the only Go you would let yourself play was NetGo under his name, and amateur games. For making you afraid to take your own path."

"It's not like that!"

Akira dared to look up at that, and Hikaru's expression was one that he wished he could soothe away.

"He didn't hold me back or anything. He-"

"And most of all, I'm angry at him for making you play his Go," he said.

Hikaru shook his head.

"You have been learning Go for nearly six years now, but you've only started to play your own Go in the last few months. No wonder no one ever guessed that you were Sai before--how could they, when you were so determined to hide your own Go?"

"No! You're-" Hikaru stopped.

Akira waited for him to continue, feeling perspiration gather in his palm. It was hard to decipher Hikaru's expressions, but as seconds passed, he could see the Hikaru's jaw hardening.

"You're jealous of me!"

Akira could feel his jaw drop.

Hikaru continued, "You are, right? I'm the better player between us." He got to his feet. "You'll have to chase me now, instead of the other way round, and you can't accept it!"

Akira was suddenly coldly furious. "Me, jealous of you?"

"I'm right, aren't I?" Hikaru said, raising a hand to point at him.

Akira stood up as well, and slapped his fingers away. "Why would I be jealous of someone who can't even play his own Go?" he asked.

"But you are!" Hikaru declared. "You want to play like Sai, and you can't!"

Akira could barely speak through his rage. "Only if he actually played for himself, instead of hiding behind you!"

He did see the fist coming towards him. Shock prevented him from moving, and even when it stopped right in front of his face, it was long seconds before he reacted. "S-Shindou!"

"Stop hating Sai!" Hikaru shouted at him, and sat down heavily. "Just stop, okay?" He held his head between his hands. "You're the only

one besides me who knows him," he said to the floor. "I couldn't bear it if you hated him, Akira."

"I don't hate Sai," Akira said.

"Huh?"

By now, Akira was wishing that he had not said anything at all. "I am angry with him, but I don't hate him. I even admire him very much. But I hate the way he makes you tie yourself in knots, Hikaru."

Hikaru looked up.

Akira went on. "Sometimes I'm afraid you'd never be free of him, and sometimes I'm afraid you are--that you've lost him, but you can't accept it."

"I'm trying..." Hikaru muttered.

"I've been waiting for you to play your own Go, ever since you told me about him. I'm impatient, Hikaru. I want you to hurry up and join me: not for me to chase you, or you me, but in the race for the perfect game, for the Hand of God."

Hikaru was very quiet after that.

Akira waited, not knowing whether to continue standing, and give Hikaru his distance, or to join Hikaru on the floor, and touch him gently.

"I've wanted him to come back for such a long time," Hikaru finally said.

Akira nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"And it's still difficult to accept that he'll never be back."

This time Akira did sit down, not touching, but letting Hikaru know that he was near.

"For a long time, I woke up every morning hoping things would turn out different. I saw him everywhere: people with long hair, priests at the shrines with their robes... How could he be gone, when I'm still here?" he said, and slammed a fist on the floor.

Akira covered the fist with his own hand, saying nothing.

"But I'm beginning to understand," Hikaru said, with a stutter on the last word that sounded like a broken laugh. "My Go encompasses everything about me. That includes Sai. I need not fear losing him, in playing my own Go." He turned to look at Akira, his expression becoming focused once more. "You taught me that."

Akira met his eyes. He was suddenly reminded of yesterday afternoon when Hikaru had, of his own accord, challenged him to a game. It was the same look, of someone taking an irrevocable step forward. Three steps forward, and a leap, he thought dizzily.

-----to be continued-----

Chapter 19

------(19)-----

Akira slid the door open. It was dark inside his room: Hikaru had not turned on the lights, probably in an attempt to mislead others into thinking it was empty. It was a futile attempt, in his opinion. "Hikaru?" he said.

Someone grabbed him and pulled into the room, with the door sliding closed with a loud 'clack' almost immediately.

"What-"

The same person placed a hand over his mouth. "Shh! They'll hear you!" Hikaru whispered, none too loudly. There was a click, and dim light revealed his boyfriend, half-sitting on him.

Akira pulled him off. "What are you doing?" he asked. "And with that?"

In the light of his penlight (held in the mouth), Hikaru looked like a ghoul, with wild eyes and hair. "Have they gone yet?" he asked.

"Who?"

"The reporters!"

"No, they haven't."

Hikaru's lips parted in a silent and, in Akira's view, an exaggerated scream.

Akira kept an iron grip on his composure, taking the penlight from Hikaru and getting up to turn on the lights. "Why are you hiding in my room," he asked, keeping his voice mild, "when there are..." he

paused to do a mental tally, "six groups of reporters in my family's main hall?"

Hikaru winced. "I didn't know they'd be following me!" he wailed. "And six? I only counted four!"

It had been two weeks. To Hikaru's barely concealed horror, *Go Weekly*, *Electric Go*, and *Everybody Go!* had all expressed interest in interviewing him. Ostensibly, it was to highlight his achievements as an amateur Go player. However, Hikaru insisted--not without justification, Akira acknowledged--that all they wanted to do was to quiz him about Sai. The news had taken on a life of its own when it emerged that Hikaru was also dating Touya Akira, son of Touya Kouyo.

"You might be interested to know that *Baduk Baduk* and *Weiqi 1-2-3* have also heard about you," Akira said dryly. He had progressed from concern, embarrassment, and a little envy, to amusement at Hikaru's predicament. "The local newspaper also sent someone."

"Damn it," Hikaru said, without heat. "I thought it'd blow over after a few days."

"It would have taken longer," Akira said, more familiar with the press from the time his father was still a professional. "You did manage to shut down half the internet Go websites around the world."

Hikaru whimpered.

"My mother's talking to them right now," Akira said. "Luckily, she's used to entertaining reporters. But it's impolite to keep them waiting. You should come out and meet them, even if it's just to say 'No comment.' But if you want to leave now--"

Hikaru looked hopefully at him.

"Keep in mind that these are Go reporters."

"Not going to give up easily, huh?" Hikaru said.

Akira agreed silently. Few people were more tenacious than reporters who were also Go-obsessed.

"But I can't tell them all about Sai!" Hikaru said. "They'll think I'm crazy!"

"You don't have to. Tell them as little as you like."

After long seconds, Hikaru sighed. "All right, let's go."

"I met Sai in an internet café..."

"... he just disappeared one day..."

"I miss him."

Hikaru gave a deliberately vague account of his friendship with Sai, ending with how he had continued to play as Sai. With deep confusion, but sensing that he was not about to say anything more after repeated questions, the reporters finally left the Touya residence. The day after the story was printed, Hikaru had a panic attack, ate six bowls of ramen, and locked himself in the bathroom again.

Hikaru and Akira had expected the accusations of duplicity--using another person's name in public was suspicious behaviour, no matter how one looked at it--and the disbelieving reception from segments of the Go-playing public. There were the complaints of publicity for publicity's sake. They had even come to expect hostility from those who insisted that Shindou Hikaru, a mere high school student, was perpetuating a giant hoax on everyone. They were prepared to hunker down and wait for all of it to go away.

What they did not expect, were the challengers. And who.

"Kuwabara Honinbou?" Hikaru repeated, staring at Akira in bewilderment. "Isn't he the one with the title--"

"The Honinbou title," Akira said. "The name 'Honinbou' is used as a courtesy name by those who hold the title. I've told you this before."

"Uh, yeah, you did... Hey! Just like your father," Hikaru's eyes lit up in understanding. "I've always wondered why some people call him 'Touya Meijin'..."

Akira felt a familiar mixture of exasperated affection well up in him as Hikaru began to muse about the first time he met--"No, I literally ran into him! Bam!"--Akira's father. He shook Hikaru's arm to get his attention. "Are you listening to me? I said, Kuwabara-sensei is here, and he wants to play with you."

Hikaru looked puzzled. "But you're planning on challenging him for his title, aren't you? So shouldn't he be here to play with you?"

There were times when Akira wished he could bludgeon Hikaru over the head and reduce that obliviousness. "No, he's here to play with you. Now. He's in the classroom." He tugged Hikaru away from his attempts to rearrange Akira's wardrobe and pushed him into the classroom.

Kuwabara looked as formidable as Akira knew him: sparse, white hair on a balding head and hooded, watchful eyes set on a wrinkled face. He had been talking to Akira's father, both sitting before a Go board, and when he looked up at his entrance, Akira could have sworn he saw a particularly sly smile flash on his lips.

Beside him, Hikaru's eyes fell on Kuwabara immediately. "It's you!" he said--pointing, Akira noted with a mental groan--and stomped forward. "You insulted Akira, that time!"

Akira could feel his eyebrows go up at Hikaru's words, and glancing at his father, he saw that he had done the same. Thinking back, he

remembered that Hikaru had met Kuwabara once, at the Go Institute.

Kuwabara seemed to know what Hikaru was referring to. "If you're too stupid to realize that it was just a way of challenging him, then you don't deserve to play with me," he said.

"S-stupid!" Hikaru said scornfully, and sat down opposite him without being asked. "You were insulting him, and don't you dare to deny it!"

"Hikaru-" Akira murmured.

"Nigiri!" Hikaru shouted, scooping a handful of stones and putting his clenched fist on the Go board.

If anything, the smirk on Kuwabara's face only widened. "Avenging your boyfriend's honour, huh, punk?" He started to wheeze with laughter.

Hikaru's eyes narrowed. "If I win, you have to apologize to Akira!"

Even Akira's father looked startled at that, but Kuwabara only grinned. "Ah, young love," he said in a saccharin voice and a fake, coy expression that looked as though a crocodile was pretending to be a rabbit. "And if you lose?"

"Then I'll apologize to you, for thinking you unworthy of the name of Honinbou," Hikaru said. "Come on, old man!"

Even Kuwabara looked startled, Akira thought, at Hikaru's words about Honinbou, but it was only a flicker of the pro's eyelids, and he had regained his composure at "old man".

"All right," Kuwabara said. He looked at Hikaru's fist with a smile. "Odd, then. For an odd duck like you."

Hikaru visibly ground his teeth as he relaxed his fist, letting the stones fall onto the Go board. Some stuck to his fingers, and he had to shake them off before counting them. "Even," he said.

Kuwabara took the white stones without comment, waiting as Hikaru changed to a cross-legged position.

With the most perfunctory of courtesies--"Get on with it!" and "You're supposed to start, remember?"--they played a game.

And another one.

Akira, still sitting beside Hikaru, looked up from the Go board at the end of the second one, his eyes widening to see Kaneda and Fujimoto in the room as well. When had they come in, he wondered? He had heard nothing. Beside them sat Ashiwara, who looked serious for once, though his eyes twinkled when he caught Akira's look. Behind him, Akira could see Ochi, too engrossed in watching the Go board to notice that he was under scrutiny. Isumi sat near the door, next to Ohda. And to his left was Waya.

Who looked away the moment he noticed Akira's eyes on him. He looked angry, though, and Akira ticked off a mental list. He had suspected Waya all along of being the person who revealed Hikaru's secret.

Though the second game had come to a close, Hikaru and Kuwabara were, to put it politely, still exchanging comments.

"Best two out of three!"

"I think we can call it a draw."

"You just want to get out of apologizing to Akira!"

"What, your boyfriend won't put out if you can't avenge his honour?"

Akira flushed to his roots, while his ears caught a snicker from the watchers that was hastily stifled.

Hikaru flushed, too. "Akira wouldn't refuse... n-none of your business!" he finished hastily, the tips of his ears turning red.

Kuwabara began laughing.

"You! You're insulting Akira again!"

"Kuwabara-sensei, Shindou, it's getting late. I think we should stop for the day, don't you think?" Touya Kouyo's voice was polite, but firm.

The reminder that Akira's father had been in the room all this time dashed away Hikaru's belligerence. Even his neck turned red. "Uh, of c-course, Touya-sensei!"

Kuwabara gave Akira's father a sly look. "Looking out for your son-in-law already?" he asked.

"Kuwabara-sensei."

Kuwabara snorted, but gave a slow nod. "My old bones can't take this much sitting, anyway," he said. He looked at Hikaru firmly.

"Punk, we each won a game, even though they were just speed Go games. Very well." He looked at Akira. "If you have been playing with the punk here all this while, there may be hope for you."

Akira inclined his head, still too embarrassed to react in any other way. "Thank you, Kuwabara-sensei."

"Huh." Kuwabara turned back to Hikaru. "Well?"

Hikaru spluttered. "You call that an apology?" he shouted. Or rather, he tried to, but Akira hurriedly nudged his foot. "Uh," he wound down. "I mean, thank you. And you aren't such a bad sort. Shuusaku would have liked to play with you."

Kuwabara looked startled for the second time that afternoon, but he nodded. "I see," he said cryptically. He got to his feet slowly. "Yes, it's time for me to leave," he announced to the room.

Akira stood up, and with a tug, Hikaru got up as well. With Akira's father, both of them saw Kuwabara all the way to the front door of

the Touya residence. Before he left, though, Kuwabara turned back, his eyes firmly fixed on Hikaru's head. "And what name will you be playing under from now on?"

Hikaru froze at the question, but he recovered. "Mine," he said. "It's 'Starmaker', by the way," he added.

"Che. I knew that."

Akira felt only mild surprise at the confirmation that Kuwabara played NetGo, and belatedly realized that Kuwabara had initially come to play with 'Sai', but had seen for himself the actual player under that name, after only two games. His respect for the pro rose even higher.

"Good," Hikaru said to his back. "I'll be looking out for you, too. 'Kawaii Sweetie'."

Kuwabara paused, but did not look back.

On the way back, Hikaru grumbled, as they walked behind Akira's father. "It just goes to show, Akira, that everyone is pretending to be a fourteen-year-old girl on the internet."

Akira tried to equate old, wily Kuwabara with the username 'Kawaii Sweetie', and failed.

"But his Go skills gave him away," Hikaru went on. "You know," he paused, gathering his thoughts.

Akira stopped as well, watching as his father entered the classroom ahead of them. "Yes?"

"Sai would have loved to play with him," Hikaru said, then grinned the same cocky grin he had aimed at Kuwabara when he won the first game, the one that made Kuwabara scowl, and clear the board immediately for a second game. "I'm glad it was me, though."

The next few days continued to be interesting.

"Ichiryu 9-dan's NetGo name is 'Moonlit-9'?"

"Yup," Hikaru said, still laughing, as he sat down at the table in Akira's room. "Very p-poetic, right?"

Akira thought of Ichiryu's shiny bald pate, and understood why Hikaru had excused himself halfway through the game, where they all heard him laughing outside. Perhaps discomfited by Hikaru's behaviour, Ichiryu had miscalculated, and lost the game. That was the day before yesterday.

Hikaru sat up, biting into the one of the cookies provided by Akira's mother. He had become more relaxed after several days, as it slowly dawned on him that the visiting pros to the Touya residence only wanted to play Go with him. Unlike with Kuwabara, though, he had not revealed that he knew any of their NetGo names to them. "I thought he wanted to kill me!" he said, spraying crumbs everywhere.

Akira pushed the glass of juice into his hands. "Not in our house," he said.

As a result of the NetGo connection, Hikaru had been finding himself playing with people whose Go he recognized. It pointed to the widespread popularity of NetGo with Japanese pros, though the fact that Hikaru could identify them through their playing styles was frankly amazing.

Hikaru washed the rest of the cookie down with the juice, and wiped his mouth with a hand. "And then there's that Zama. He kept chewing on that fan. I thought he wanted to bite on me!"

"It's a well-known habit of Zama-sensei's."

"It's damn creepy," Hikaru declared. Spooked at first, Hikaru had retaliated too late and eventually lost by half a moku. Afterwards, he had said wryly that he needed to improve his composure when he played in person. That was yesterday.

"You also know him from NetGo?" Akira asked.

Hikaru nodded, grabbing another cookie, popping the entire thing into his mouth. "Yeah," he said, and mumbled something else around the cookie.

Akira, used to interpreting his food-related mumbles, heard what he said, and felt his eyebrows rose. "What?"

Hikaru tried to nod, laugh and chew at the same time. Not surprisingly, he ended up choking, and drank all the juice in his glass and half of Akira's.

Akira was still surprised. "Zama-sensei is 'Russian Bear'?" he said, wondering if he heard wrongly.

Hikaru started to laugh, but stopped and clutched at his stomach again, complaining that it hurt from too much coughing. "You can't make this up, Akira. Yes, that's really his NetGo name. And he uses the same one for the 'Freestyle Go' and 'Black and White' websites, too."

Akira rubbed his forehead, trying not to laugh. "This isn't good, Hikaru. I won't be able to play with him with a straight face in the future."

"No, it's good! You know his secret NetGo name! And I-" he shrugged, "well, *Sai* played many games with him. I'll show you the kifu, and you can study his style."

It seemed as though Hikaru was getting better at putting the 'Sai' persona behind him--though he would never forget the real Sai, Akira knew.

"That would be very useful, yes," Akira said. "But I don't see how knowing his NetGo name will help."

"I think it sort of suits his Go style. You'll understand him better. At first it's like he's very slow, even clumsy, then suddenly, he just lunges at you and claws off your arm or something."

Hikaru's grasp of Go styles, and the way he saw them, never failed to amaze Akira.

"Some of the pros have pretty boring names, though," Hikaru said, taking the opportunity to crawl into Akira's lap. "I mean, both you and your father use your own names. So does that Isumi." He did not mention Isumi's friend, Waya.

Akira suspected that Hikaru, too, had concluded that it was Waya who revealed his identity. It looked like Hikaru planned to go out of his way to avoid him. "Well, you did say that Ogata-san's is 'Great White Shark'," he said. "And Morishita-sensei's is 'Tanker'."

Hikaru made a face at the mention of Ogata, but brightened up at the mention of Morishita. "Morishita is a scary man," he said, but he sounded good-humoured. He had lost a game against Morishita, by one-and-a-half moku, but Morishita had surprised everybody by openly inviting him to the study sessions he held in his home.

Hikaru had stuttered a promise to think about it, too intimidated by the pro's fierce expression to refuse right away.

That was today.

"Did you see the way he frowned at me?" Hikaru went on, wrapping his arms around Akira. "I mean, he won! I wonder why."

Akira rather thought it was because Morishita realized through mid-game that Hikaru was treating the game as a chance to experiment on a number of risky hands. "It's an interesting name," he said, choosing not to comment on that. The fact that Hikaru felt relaxed enough to do that was a heartening sign. Despite his skill, Hikaru's performance against the pro visitors was still inconsistent. He was still adapting to face-to-face confrontations with high-level players,

and stumbled more often than not. But he did not seem to mind; on the contrary, Akira could see his determination to win grow with each game.

"Yeah," Hikaru agreed, snuggling closer. "Suits him, huh? Only An Taeson has a scarier name: 'Black Ops'. You know, I bet Kurata would be totally jealous if he knew that."

"Wait, how do you know what An Taeson's NetGo name is? You've never played with him in person. And what do you mean, Kurata-san would be jealous?"

"I saw the kifu for those games your father played with him last year," Hikaru said, stretching like a cat. Slowly, he unbuttoned Akira's jeans.

Amused and indulgent, Akira let Hikaru pull the jeans from him. "And Kurata-san?" he prompted, idly wondering if they had remembered to lock the door. "What's his NetGo name?"

"Oh, he calls himself 'Flower Power'."

That spoiled the mood.

Akira made a mental note never to discuss NetGo names with Hikaru again.

April came, and Hikaru finally graduated from high school. He had been invited by the Go Institute to take part in the Pro Exams; the preliminary exams were in July. It was a long wait, but Akira was glad about it, because Hikaru seemed to be more confident about himself as the days went on. He had, after all, played with more than a dozen pros since the news about Sai broke, and though he played less NetGo now, when he did, it was as himself as the weeks went on. A period of adaptation would only help him to grow as a player.

Now, all that Akira had to do was to work even harder at his own Go. Hikaru was still far ahead, but watching him play with the pros that Akira himself had met made the distance seem traversable. They would be in the same world, after all.

And now Hikaru was going to introduce him to a part of that world he seldom encountered.

"You've never done this before? Really?" Hikaru was shifting his weight from foot to foot. He seemed much too gleeful.

"No." Akira shook his head for emphasis, and leant back in his chair, turning around from the computer so he could look at Hikaru directly.

Hikaru frowned suddenly. "But you're more experienced than me!" he said, with an air of pointing out the obvious. "Years and years and years! And you're always so knowledgeable about Go!" His tone grew higher and higher, until it squeaked on the last 'Go.'

"No," Akira repeated, half-amused by his boyfriend, and half-annoyed. What Hikaru meant by 'knowledgeable' was really basic information about the Go world that anyone with a passing familiarity with Go would know. One day, he was going to tie Hikaru to a chair and not give him any ramen until he had pounded something about the Go world into that empty head. "Not about this."

"Hah!"

But that was neither here nor there. Akira reached out and grabbed Hikaru's arms, stopping him from dancing around in triumph. "I told you before, my father forbade me from taking part in amateur competitions, even though I started playing Go at a young age. He didn't want me to become competitive too early." He raised his eyebrows. "What reason would there be for me to go to such events?"

"Wow," Hikaru looked awed. "You mean, even when you were young, Touya-sensei thought you were *that* good?"

Sometimes, Akira thought as he revisited the urge to knuckle Hikaru on his head, it was refreshing to know that Hikaru was the only person who did not automatically remember, or assume, that Akira was a child prodigy just because of his father. Even now, years after he had turned pro, he still came across players (who should have known better) who saw the name 'Touya' and connected it with 'Touya Meijin', before anything else. Hikaru's years-ago assumption of 'We're the same age, of course we should play with each other!' had been startling, but it was also, Akira thought, a sign of some sort.

He pulled Hikaru down to sit beside him on the floor, close to each other, their shoulders matching. He had never thought about it before, but he and Hikaru had always seemed to grow at the same pace, neither becoming much taller than the other. "Hikaru, until I became a pro, I hadn't even gone to the Go Institute. I played at home and the Go salon, or at the Go Study Centre."

Hikaru pushed up more closely against him for a second, like a cat angling for a pat or a rub, then stood up again, evidently too restless to sit down. "All right!" he punched the air like one of the characters on those foreign television programs. "Finally, there's something in Go that I know better than Akira!"

Akira reached up and gave him a gentle push. "That's true. So you'll have to show me around this time," he finished.

"No problem!" Hikaru pulled him to his feet. "Let's go," he said, ushering Akira towards the door. "We're going to have a great time!"

They were hardly out of the door and walking towards the train station when Hikaru slung an arm around his shoulders, "Just you wait, there's this ramen stand outside the main hall that has a beef stock to kill for..."

Akira watched the others on the street, smiling or frowning at Hikaru's loud speech about hand-made ramen. The sunlight was

warm on his face, and warmer still was Hikaru's presence next to him. It was a good day to be outside.

-----the end-----